



# EASTER

*in art* by Tim Marlow





# INTRODUCTION

Christianity has been the most enduring and many would say the dominant subject in Western art for the past 2,000 years. Initially, images of Christ were few and furtive, a response both to the Roman persecution of the new religion and the antipathy to images in the Jewish tradition from which Christianity emerged. But once it had been accepted by the Emperor Constantine and his successors during the fourth century, Christianity began to use mosaic, painting and sculpture as a means of proclaiming the faith and providing a focus for devotion and worship.

Of course, the Christian message has been a strongly verbal one – the Word made flesh, as the Bible puts it – with the story of Christ's life written in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and subsequently preached by countless men and women down the ages. But the most vivid accounts have been created by artists who have transformed the Word into some of the most compelling images ever made, images which have almost burned themselves into

the collective imagination of Western culture and which still strike something of a universal chord today, even to the legions of non-believers who experience them in galleries and churches throughout the world.

This publication, along with the three-part television series which it accompanies, explores the most dramatic and important part of Christ's time on earth depicted by artists over the past two millennia, namely the Easter story, beginning with his betrayal, suffering and death on the Cross and ending with his subsequent resurrection and ascension to Heaven. It looks at how the various episodes have been portrayed in a range of styles and materials and crucially asks what these objects tell us about the world in which they were created. In addition, it seeks to examine the impact of the work over the centuries.

Given the fact that there have been quite literally millions of works of art devoted to the Easter story created since the death of Jesus of Nazareth, the choice of individual

paintings and sculptures is, by definition, somewhat random and personal, but I have tried to select objects and images that are as varied and as powerful as possible. These range from some of the most iconic works ever made, which have been seen in the flesh, so to speak, as well as in reproduction by many millions, to those known by relatively few people. I hope you are both reassured and surprised as well as informed and sometimes provoked by the selection.

Finally, I would like to stress that the entire project is aimed at believers and non-believers alike. Everyone draws on their own experiences, desires, beliefs and intellect when they confront a work of art, whatever its subject. Likewise, although brought up in a Christian culture and with a profound respect for many of the central tenets of Christianity, I am firmly of the view that religion is an intensely private affair, a personal quest for understanding and salvation – even if it is made gloriously public through art and architecture.

*Tim Marlow*





01

# BETRAYAL

The week leading up to Easter, known as Holy Week, begins with Christ's entry into Jerusalem on a donkey on Palm Sunday. Artists have depicted the scene, but without ever producing any images to compete with the dramas which take place a few days later. Christ was in his early thirties, a man with a growing band of followers and a reputation for performing miracles and preaching a radical message of love and forgiveness. He was also a potential threat to the status quo that existed between the Jewish religious leaders in the city and the secular Roman authorities headed by the Governor, Pontius Pilate.

This threat began to become apparent when Jesus threw the money lenders out of the temple, an episode which has inspired some memorable paintings, not least by El Greco in the late sixteenth century. But the real psychological drama begins in a modest upstairs room where Christ and his twelve disciples or apostles sit down to eat their final meal together.

## THE LAST SUPPER

The four Gospels tell us that the meal was a Passover feast to celebrate the principal Jewish festival of the year, a festival commemorating the liberation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt led by Moses and chronicled in the book of Exodus. Following Old Testament tradition the meal consisted of the Paschal lamb and unleavened bread, with the sacrifice of the lamb in Jewish tradition a neat metaphor for what was soon to happen to Christ. Recently, certain scholars have doubted whether or not the Last Supper would have actually been a Passover meal on the grounds that it would have been highly unlikely that the subsequent death sentence handed out to Christ and his execution would have taken place at the time of a major Jewish festival. None the less, Easter and the Passover have become inextricably linked and their celebrations coincide every year. Interestingly enough, the depictions

of the Last Supper by artists have little or no specifically Judaic content. Instead, two types of subject matter have emerged: one is the sacramental vision of Jesus with a chalice and a Host, where he asks his disciples to eat and drink the wine and bread in remembrance of Him and which is re-enacted every Sunday at church in the Christian Eucharist or Mass; the other is the moment where Christ announces that one of the disciples will betray him, and it is this image which has appealed most strongly to the artistic imagination.



## The Judas spoke, the one who was to betray him: "Master, can you mean me?"

MATTHEW 26:25

### 01 The Last Supper, c.490

Church of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna

This mosaic is the earliest surviving representation of the Last Supper, produced for the walls of the upper nave of the imperial church of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna sometime around the end of the fifth century. Christ and his apostles recline around a table in a scene reminiscent of a Roman feast, with Jesus clad in a robe of imperial purple, a colour worn by Roman emperors since the reign of Julius Caesar. Ravenna at the time was capital of the Western Roman Empire and the medium of mosaic was an expensive and intricate process which the Christian Roman emperors had begun to patronise on an elaborate scale from the fourth century onwards.

Christ raises his hand as if speaking and seven of the disciples look towards the figure at the far right end of the table. From this it becomes clear that he has just announced that one

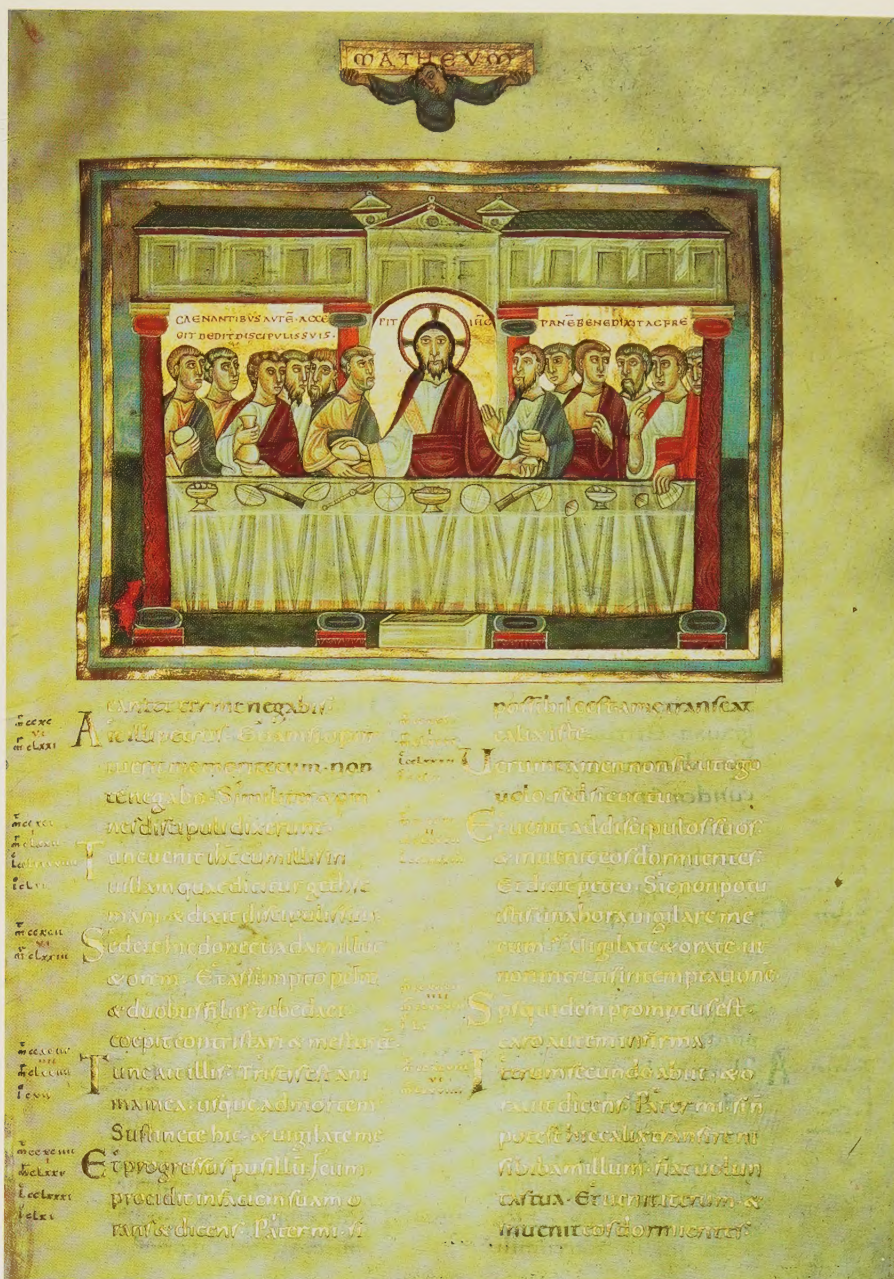
of them will betray him and, as St Matthew describes it, Judas then speaks and asks: "Master can you mean me?"

Instead of eating the sacrificial lamb, the work clearly shows a feast of fish. During the first three centuries of Christianity, the fish became a symbol of Christ, a secret code in a period of brutal Roman persecution. This stems from the Greek word for fish, *Ichthys*, the spelling of which also coincides with the initial letters of the words Jesus Christ, Son of God, saviour. The word play and visual punning continued well after the granting of religious toleration to Christians in the Edict of Milan in 313 by Constantine. There is also a reference in this image to the miracle of the loaves and fishes performed by Jesus in order to feed what the Gospels describe as 5,000 people. Finally, many of the disciples were fishermen by trade and had been encouraged to be "fishers of men" by their Lord and leader.

### 02 Image of the Last Supper from the Golden Gospel of Henry III, c.1050

This Biblical illustration was produced by the Benedictine monks of the monastery of Echternach in what is now Luxembourg. Illuminated manuscripts had a long tradition stemming from Classical antiquity, initially on papyrus but subsequently, by the early Middle Ages, on parchment (or vellum) made from animal skin. After the violent break-up of Europe that followed the demise of the Roman Empire in the West, the task of depicting the life and death of Christ moved to the newly formed monasteries established by men such as St Benedict, described as "the Patriarch of Western monasticism", who lived from around 480 to 547AD, but whose legacy flourished in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

This image of the Last Supper is



a Eucharistic one. Jesus is neatly framed at the centre by a small arch and two red pillars, flanked by six disciples on either side. He holds bread in his right hand and a chalice of wine in his left, arms outstretched – a gesture made by the priest at the altar at Mass before Communion, itself a re-creation of the Last Supper in ritualistic form. The Catholic Church maintains that at the moment of consecration, mirrored in this image, the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ through a process known as transubstantiation, and that those who receive the elements receive Christ directly.



03 Giotto di Bondone,  
*The Last Supper*,  
c. 1303-1306

*Arena Chapel, Padua*

This is part of one of the great works in Western art: three fresco cycles of nearly 40 images on the walls of the Arena Chapel in Padua by the Tuscan artist Giotto di Bondone (1267-1337). On the upper walls of the chapel there are scenes from the lives of the Virgin Mary and her parents Joachim and Anne, while the lower ones contain a more comprehensive visual account of the life and death of Jesus. Nearest to the viewer and conveying the most dramatic part of the cycle are the scenes of Christ's Passion, beginning with the Last Supper located in the far right-hand corner of the nave closest to the sanctuary.

Giotto chooses the moment when Jesus announces that one of the disciples will betray him, as described in St John's Gospel.

Judas is clearly visible, clad in a yellow robe (a colour incidentally that medieval Jews were made to wear in parts of Europe), reaching towards the bowl in which Christ dips the bread. He alone has no halo; Jesus has a halo of pure gold. Leaning on Christ's shoulder, having asked the question, is John – "the disciple whom Jesus loved" and the writer of the fourth Gospel. Next to him, white

haired and statuesquely solemn, is St Peter.

Giotto conveys this unfolding narrative in a way unprecedented in Western art. Each of the disciples is depicted as an individual, not a type, expressing recognisable human emotion, ranging from bewilderment to shock and disbelief. The figures themselves have a sense of solidity in marked contrast to the two-dimensional flatness of those rendered in medieval manuscripts or even mosaics. Most strikingly of all, they seem to exist in a real space rather than floating against an abstract background or celestial void. By painting a receding portico framed by slender pillars, Giotto gives the whole image a sense of depth. For a largely illiterate population of worshippers whose understanding of the Bible was tempered by the fact that it was written and read to them in Latin, Giotto's work effectively brought the story of the Last Supper to life.

04 Leonardo da Vinci,  
*The Last Supper*,  
1495-1497

*Convent of Sta Maria delle Grazie, Milan*

In spite of its faded, ghost-like appearance – the result of Leonardo's phenomenal desire to experiment and realise a lasting technical perfection – this work remains one of the icons of Western art and the dominant and defining image of the Last Supper.

It was painted high on the wall at the far end of the refectory of the Convent of Sta Maria delle Grazie in Milan to suggest the idea to the monks that as they ate, their Lord and his first followers were doing likewise.

It's an elevated vision in almost every sense. The viewer looks up in awe at a scene which, if rendered strictly according to the laws of nature, would be virtually invisible since the most one could see would be the underside of the table. Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) subtly tilts it forward to reveal the unfolding drama with Christ at the centre, framed by three windows which also suggest that he is the illuminating presence.

The disciples are arranged in four groups of three and the image is once again inspired by St John's Gospel. In fact, the scene is a few seconds earlier than that depicted by Giotto: Christ has announced his impending betrayal

and John leans towards Peter, who is pointing at Jesus while imploring his fellow disciple to ask who the betrayer is. The painting is highly ordered in composition but extraordinarily expressive, with each of the figures conveying both a collective reaction and an intensely personal emotion. In a way, it seems as if Leonardo is producing a case study in human response to tragedy, and he spent weeks searching for the "right" models from the streets of Milan in order to achieve a level of naturalism never quite realised before in Western art.

The work can also be seen as an extension of Leonardo's scientific enquiries, both in the dry fresco technique he employed and which ultimately failed, and in terms of his analysis of the way in which sound waves work: "Those who are nearer understand better," he scrawled in his notes for the painting, and "those farther away hear poorly."

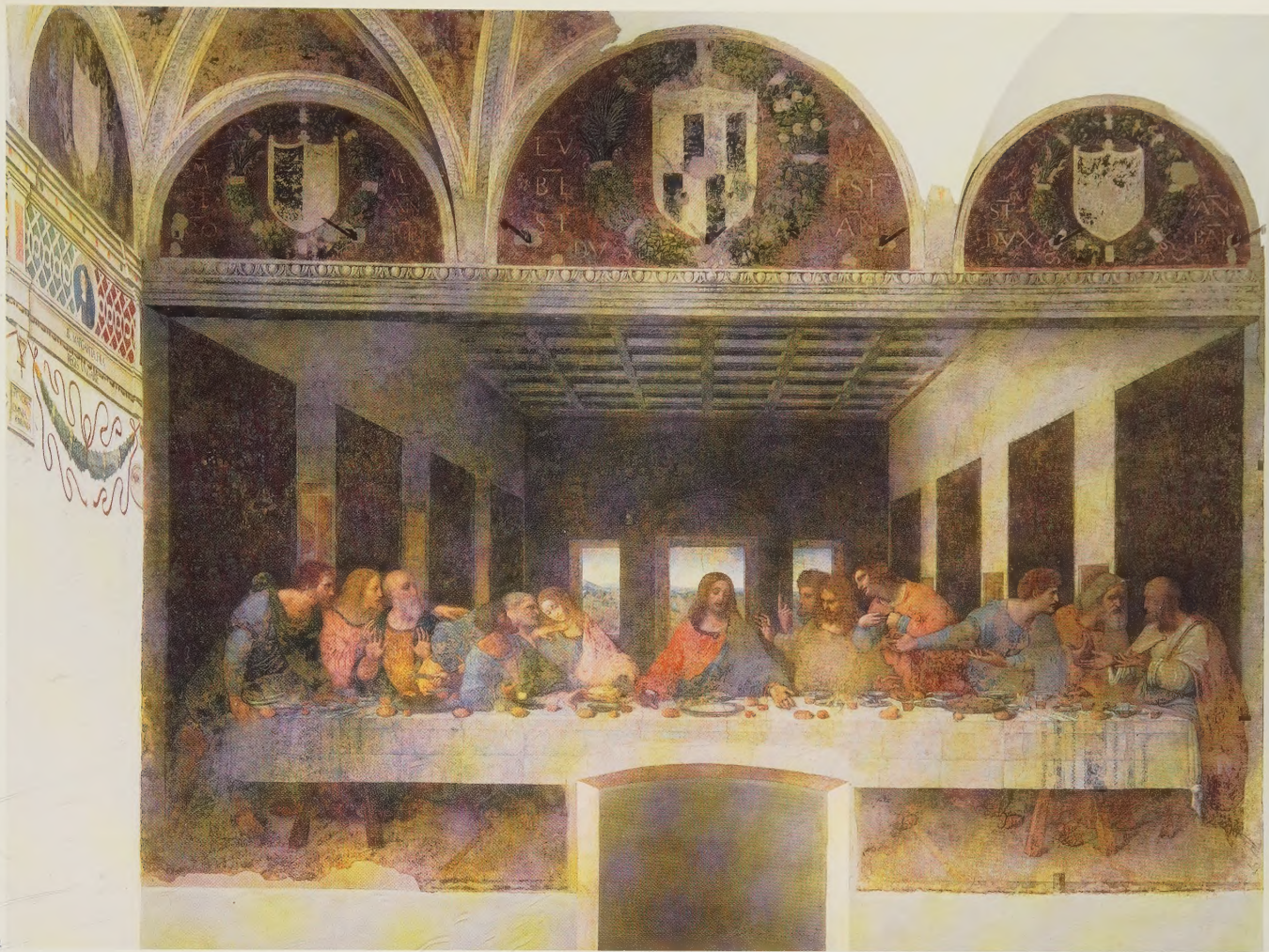
When it was first unveiled in 1497 the painting was hailed as "miraculous" and "divine", although it quickly began to deteriorate. Many art historians consider it the first work of the High Renaissance and it remains Leonardo's most monumental and significant artistic achievement. Contemplating it today, even as it flickers like a fading hologram before our eyes, it remains the most enduring image of the Last Supper ever made.



"In truth, in very truth, I tell you, one of you is going to betray me." The disciples looked at one another in bewilderment: whom could he be speaking of? One of them, the one he loved, was reclining close beside Jesus. So Simon Peter nodded to him and said, "Ask who it is he means." That disciple, as he reclined, leaned back close to Jesus and asked, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus replied, "It is the man to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." Then, after dipping it in the dish, he took it out and gave it to Judas, son of Simon Iscariot.

JOHN 13:21





04

## 05 Jacopo Tintoretto, *The Last Supper*, 1576

*Scuola Grande di San Rocco,  
Venice*

The Venetian painter Jacopo Tintoretto (1519–1593) created at least six versions of the Last Supper for churches and religious institutions in the city, the most sophisticated of which was this one, made for the illustrious Scuola Grande di San Rocco.

The scene is skewed at an oblique angle, as if Tintoretto is trying to distance himself from Leonardo's vision while still aiming at a similar degree of expressive force and spatial realism. The work hangs on the far left-hand corner of the upper level at the Scuola and from many viewpoints the supper table in the picture reads as an extension of the main altar. The steps in the foreground lead the viewer into a scene which is modest and would have clearly read as a Venetian dwelling to a contemporary audience. In the background, and adding depth to the image, the kitchens are visible and the painting has a sense of activity throughout.

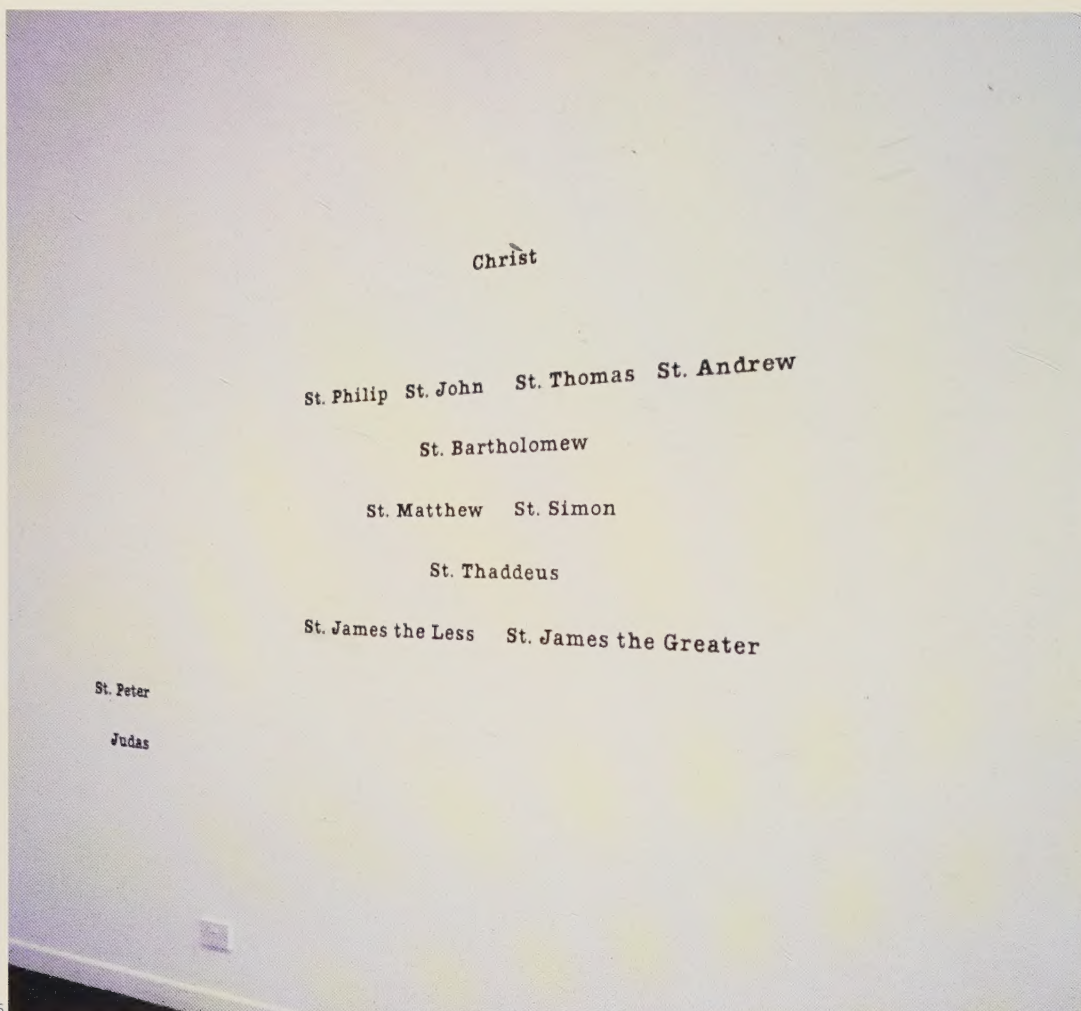
The meal takes place half in shadow with Christ sitting at the far end of the table, the smallest and most distant figure but bathed in a halo of light around his head. While the kneeling disciples in the foreground express

disquiet, Jesus offers Peter bread in the form of the Host and utters the words which, as St Luke describes it, initiate the sacrament of the Eucharist: "This is my body which is given for you: do this in remembrance of me." This is, in many ways, the supreme act of charity – offering one's life to redeem one's fellow men and the broader picture conveyed here in Tintoretto's *Last Supper* is a call to charity. On the steps two beggars sit, one of whom – on the left – is directly in line with the figure of Christ. The idea that Jesus and his disciples were humble men and a far cry from the splendour and pomp often perceived within the Catholic Church had been one of the reasons for the growing dissent which led to the Protestant Reformation. In turn, as the Catholic Church fought back and began to reform itself, stress was given to caring for the poor. In Venice, in particular, a series of Poor Laws was introduced during the middle part of the sixteenth century – all of which is alluded to in Tintoretto's painting.



05





During supper Jesus took bread, and having said the blessing he broke it and gave it to the disciples with the words: "Take this and eat; this is my body."

MATTHEW 26:26

## 06 Simon Patterson, *Last Supper Wall Drawings*, 1990

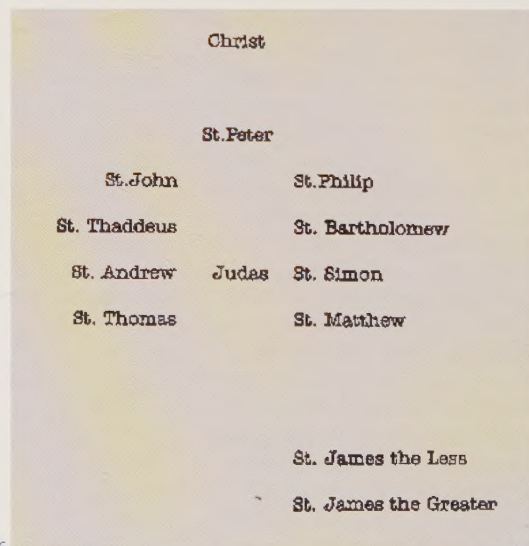
Above: *The Last Supper Arranged According to the Flat Back Four Formation (Jesus Christ in Goal)*. Right: *The Last Supper Arranged According to the Sweeper Formation (Jesus Christ in Goal)*

The fundamental difference between Protestant and Catholic interpretations of the Last Supper and of the nature of Christ's statement, "this is my body", form the basis of contemporary British artist Simon Patterson's quirky wall drawings.

Patterson (b.1967) had begun by studying Leonardo's *The Last Supper* and was struck by the compositional formation of the disciples, which he decided to explore in his own work. At the same time, the football World Cup was taking place in Italy and a debate was raging in the English press about what formation the England team should adopt: should it be a traditional

British flat back four or a continental sweeper system?

Patterson, who had already played around with the London Underground map, decided to produce his versions of the Last Supper with the apostles arranged in contrasting football formations and Christ, the saviour of all, in goal. It is a witty and intelligent work drawing parallels between religion and football, whose apparent flippancy is overcome by Patterson's smart allusion to a contrast of style and ideology: of English or Protestant values against Italian or Catholic values; of footballing dogma and religious dogma; of the debate surrounding consubstantiation and transubstantiation, where one "side" believes that the bread and wine are symbolically transformed and the other believes in a physical transformation. One only has to think of the Old Firm rivalry in Glasgow between Catholic Celtic and Protestant Rangers to understand the subtle power of the piece.







## 07 Chris Ofili, *The Upper Room*, 2002

Victoria Miro Gallery, London

In the summer of 2002, the British artist Chris Ofili (b.1968) teamed up with architect David Adjaye to create an installation called *The Upper Room* in a gallery in east London. There were thirteen canvases, each depicting a monkey and each resting on two small mounds of elephant dung. Given that Ofili had previously been accused of blasphemy in the United States for a painting he made of the Virgin Mary, one might have thought this to be a deliberately provocative work. In fact, there was a strong mystical and spiritual dimension to Ofili's piece which was readily apparent only when the installation was directly experienced. "*The Upper Room* is not a mockery of the Last Supper," Ofili explained to a journalist, "but an attempt to paint it in a different way."

The sixteenth-century Venetian artist, Paolo Veronese, produced a

version of the Last Supper which included various buffoons and animals, for which he was called before the Inquisition accused of mocking or making a monkey out of a sacred drama. In a post-Darwinian world, Ofili reminds us that monkeys are not sinful nor merely playful, they are also our ancestors.

Presiding over Ofili's "upper room" is a golden monkey – part Christ-like; part Buddha; part chimp. Each of the canvases is intricately created, a painstaking process of accretion using dots and swathes of paint, glitter and layer upon layer of resin which produces an extraordinary shimmer. The dung, which has become a kind of trademark in Ofili's art, was introduced by the painter after a visit to Africa in the early 1990s and is used to try to break up the surface and, as Ofili puts it, "to stop it becoming too beautiful". But it also gives the work a broader dimension where the apparently ethereal – in this case the shimmering resinous layers – is merged with the

earthiest of substances in what can be read as a broad vision of creation. The installation also wrestles with the idea of origins: the origins of painting and a reference to so-called primitive art; the origins of humanity; and also the origins of the Christian story and of Christ's Passion, which began in the upstairs room with the Last Supper.

The real power of the piece, though, comes from its staging – in a space reminiscent of a chapel or temple with lighting vents above each painting that seem to cause the light to slide down the surface of the canvases and then refract on to the floor, showing not just the shadows of monkeys but also of numerous individual dots. So what you initially see is not ultimately what you get from being in the room. It is as if the viewer is asked to make a leap of faith and to believe in each work as a tangible presence in and of itself. And instead of casting us, the viewers, as passive observers, it puts us right at the heart of a visual feast.



# AGONY IN THE GARDEN

After the Last Supper, the Gospels tell us that Jesus and his disciples went out to the Mount of Olives to the west of the city walls of Jerusalem and then on to the nearby Garden of Gethsemane. Peter had assured Jesus that he would never fail him, only to be told, as Matthew describes it, that "tonight before the cock crows you will disown me three times". Subsequently, according to the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Christ took Peter, James and John with him to watch over him while he prayed: "My father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Yet not as I will, but as thou wilt." In effect Jesus is soul searching. He is afraid but ultimately accepting of his fate, which arrives, as the dawn begins to break, in the form of Judas and a cohort of Roman soldiers.

This episode, known as the Agony in the Garden, was most poignantly and contrastingly visualised by two Italian artists at almost the same time, around 1460: Andrea Mantegna (1430-1506) working in Padua and his brother-in-law Giovanni Bellini (c.1435-1516) in Venice. The paintings now hang in the same room at the National Gallery in London.

When they had reached a place called Gethsemane, he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray... My heart is ready to break with grief."

MARK 14:32

## 08 Giovanni Bellini, *The Agony in the Garden*, c.1460

National Gallery, London

Christ kneels in supplication and prayer against a rock that resembles an altar. In the foreground the three disciples – James, John and Peter – lie comatose and oblivious to the sense of isolation and despair their master is feeling. In the distance, meandering their way towards a bridge that crosses the brook of Kedron, are Judas and the soldiers who are coming to arrest Jesus. In the sky, an angel hovers, holding out a chalice reminiscent of Christ's gesture at the Last Supper. According to St Luke, the angel appeared, "bringing him strength, and in anguish of the spirit he prayed more urgently; and his sweat was like clots of blood falling to the ground". Bellini doesn't depict the sweat, but by showing the sun rising in the distance, he makes clear the agonies that Jesus has gone through

during a long night of deliberation and anguish.

This bleak narrative saga should produce a bleak vision, but Bellini's painting is both luminous and, to a certain extent, lyrical. The sun irradiates the scene and, like the chalice offered by the angel, acts as a symbol of hope and redemption. Scholars have claimed that this is perhaps the first instance of an acutely observed sunrise appearing in Italian art. The burgeoning orange glow is balanced by the luminous blue sky, striking a note of visual harmony. The landscape is Italian with hill towns clearly visible in the distance, which would have been familiar to the viewers who first saw the picture. This would have reinforced the idea that although the events of Christ's Passion took place centuries before, none the less their impact and relevance remained a contemporary issue.



08



09

## 09 Andrea Mantegna, *The Agony in the Garden*, c.1460

National Gallery, London

In contrast to Bellini's luminous and expansive view of the Agony in the Garden, Mantegna pushes the scene up closer to the viewer in an image that is altogether darker and more menacing. Everything seems to be closing in on Christ – not just the long winding column of soldiers, but the fantastical rocky landscape, which imprisons rather than offering any form of redemptive hope.

The city of Jerusalem rears up spectacularly in the background, a combination of fantasy and fact mixed together for dramatic effect. There are the bell towers of an Italian town and the columns and a coliseum of the pagan Roman Empire, of which Jerusalem was a part. In addition, there is the crescent moon of Islam on the top of the tallest tower, a symbol of threat in a post-Crusading era when Christendom had all but vanquished the Turks, yet still felt vulnerable. This anachronistic combination of architectural and, by implication, religious styles draws attention to those who were to believe in Christ and those who would persecute him.

Peter – the rock on which the church would later be built – and his two fellow disciples lie asleep, as if

stone deaf to the world around. The painting itself seems almost to have been hacked from stone and Mantegna was a passionate and devoted student of ancient sculpture and architecture.

Unlike the celestial vision in Bellini's painting, Christ is confronted here by a threatening band of angels who tauntingly hold up the instruments of his Passion: the column against which he will be brutally flagellated; the cross on which he will be crucified; the sponge to be dipped in vinegar and given to him on the cross; and the lance used to pierce his side. This is Christ at his lowest ebb, confronted starkly and without mercy by what lies ahead. The bleakness is amplified by the vulture that sits on a gnarled dead tree, perhaps another reminder of the cross. But even though trees have been felled – one of which makes a bridge across the brook of Kedron – there is still the hope of new life in the form of the saplings that have sprouted from the bare rock on which Christ kneels, and in the foreground of the picture two white egrets stand in the water, symbols of the purifying power of baptism.



## BETRAYED BY A KISS

The build-up to the actual moment of Christ's betrayal by Judas with a kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane is so marked in numerous paintings of the Last Supper and the Agony in the Garden that there is a danger of anticlimax when it is depicted. For this reason, perhaps, it has never been a widely painted scene. Byzantine artists made versions in mosaic and the image was most prominent in the fourteenth century in manuscripts and fresco cycles. Thereafter, though, its popularity diminished, with notable exceptions, not least the Italian painter Caravaggio (1571-1610), whose work from the beginning of the seventeenth century is contrasted with the most celebrated of all images of the betrayal of Christ, that painted by Giotto in the Arena Chapel in Padua.

### 10 | Giotto di Bondone, *The Judas Kiss*, c.1303-1306

*Arena Chapel, Padua*

Giotto is one of the few artists to have painted the three separate episodes that make up the betrayal of Christ by Judas: the deal struck with Caiaphas, the High Priest, where the 30 pieces of silver are handed over; the Last Supper; and finally the kiss in the garden. These were painted sequentially on the walls of the Arena Chapel, interspersed with a scene after Judas had left the Last Supper where Christ washes the feet of his disciples. *The Judas Kiss* is, therefore, the defining moment of an intensely human drama.

The top half of the picture is filled with lances, pikes, staves and flaming torches starkly illuminated against the night sky, which beat a violent rhythm across the image and surround Christ at the same time. The thrust is from right to left as the soldiers move in, but there is a counter thrust as Peter cuts off the ear of the High Priest's servant, Malchus.

At the centre of the picture is the final moment of betrayal, an intimate embrace while all around violence simmers. Judas, clad in the same vivid yellow robe he wore in Giotto's depiction of the Last Supper and symbolising his treachery, looks almost ape-like, an ignoble savage who envelops his master and moves in to plant the kiss. In contrast, Jesus stares straight at his disciple, accepting of his fate, a still, calm figure amidst the noise and chaos which surrounds him. For many, this is the most memorable of the 40 or so images which fill the chapel, a monument to Giotto's developing mastery of visual story telling and of the contrast between human deceit and human dignity.



### 11 | Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Betrayal of Christ*, 1602-1603

*National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin*

Caravaggio envisions the act of betrayal so closely that the viewer feels inextricably bound up with the action. The figures are all cropped and the light from the left of the scene catches every face, bringing them out of the deep darkness of the background. The work is a carefully orchestrated tableau, but one which seems chillingly real. Like Giotto, Caravaggio depicts Judas as a brutal man, but one who clearly has begun to realise the full extent of what he has done. There is a look of growing horror on his face which, by implication, will lead to his suicide. Christ, instead of confronting his betrayer, turns away, his hands poignantly clasped together in a gesture of submission. Although he

doesn't look directly out at the viewer, he threatens to and this further involves the spectator, a feeling intensified by the gleaming armour of the soldier which appears to have burst out of the picture plane. Judas's guilt, Caravaggio seems to be saying, is ours too.

On the left-hand side of the image, a figure cries out and runs off with his robe trailing in his wake, a conflation of St John the Evangelist (whose colours he wears) and a character described in St Mark's Gospel: "Among those following was a young man with nothing but a linen cloth. They tried to seize him; but he slipped out of the linen cloth and ran naked away."

On the right-hand side and carrying a lantern is a bearded man identified as Caravaggio himself, bearing witness to the event and reminding us who has brought light to the scene.



## THE TRIAL OF CHRIST

The four Gospels are remarkably consistent in their account of the arrest, trial and conviction of Jesus. St John maintains that he was taken first to Annas, son-in-law to the High Priest Caiaphas, but all the accounts agree that he was first tried before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, a council of Jewish elders, doctors of law and chief priests which formed the highest Jewish authority in Judea.

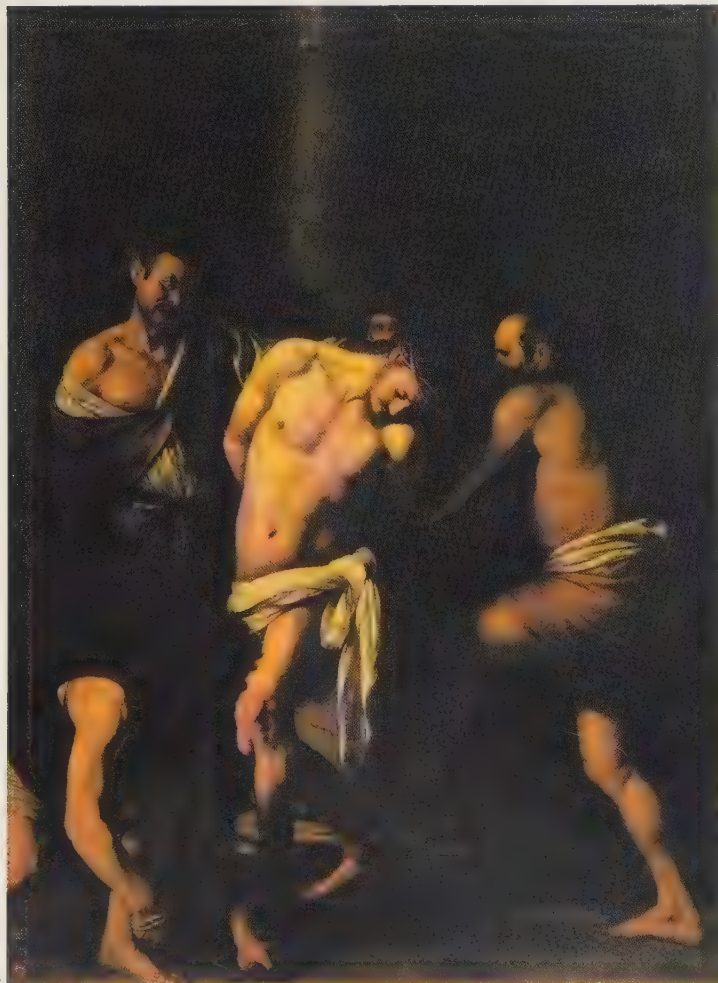
Various commentators have questioned the plausibility of this initial trial, partly on the grounds that none of the disciples was there, but also because it would have been highly unlikely that the Sanhedrin would have convened in the middle of the night, particularly during a major religious festival. What seems less in doubt is that Jesus was then handed over to the Roman authorities, specifically the Roman Prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate.

The charge was one of blasphemy: "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" the High Priest had asked him in St Mark's account of events. "I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of God and coming with the clouds of Heaven," was Christ's reply. The details may be questioned but the threat of uprising and any challenge to law and

order was a real one. A group of Jewish nationalists known as the Zealots were committed to ridding Palestine of what they saw as the Roman occupation, and the parallels with the Jewish experience in Egypt, chronicled in the Old Testament, were strong enough. In turn, Pilate had already proved a brutal ruler who was eventually removed from his post because of the large numbers of executions that had taken place under his jurisdiction. Both the Roman and Jewish authorities, therefore, feared any potential uprising and Christ's growing band of followers were just that, in spite of the message of love and tolerance that he preached.

Pilate could see that nothing was being gained, and a riot was starting; so he took water and washed his hands in full view of the people, saying, "My hands are clean of this man's blood; see to that yourselves." And with one voice the people cried, "His blood be on us, and on our children." He then released Barabbas to them; but he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

MATTHEW 27:24



### 12 | Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Flagellation of Christ*, 1607

*Museo di Capodimonte, Naples*  
Flagellation was a regular practice under Roman law for those condemned to crucifixion. One school of thought claimed that it helped to numb the body before execution, but it seems to have been part of a brutal and humiliating ritual. Caravaggio conveys the idea of a brutality which was commonplace in the faces and poses of the men who bind Christ to the column. They pull at his hair and steady his legs against the stone while tugging hard on the ropes, concentrating on the job in hand.

As an artist who had made his reputation in Rome, Caravaggio would have been aware of the fragment of what was believed to be the actual column of the flagellation in the church of Santa Prassede in the city, and this may well have fired up an imagination that always sought to paint Christian images with as much

intense realism as possible. This particular work (one of two created by the artist within a twelve-month period) was made in Naples while Caravaggio was on the run from a death sentence issued after he had killed a man in a duel in Rome in 1606. He may well have identified with the scene of a man facing a death sentence on a personal level. Naples also had a number of what were called flagellant communities of monks, who regularly had themselves scourged in order to identify more closely with the suffering of their Saviour. The practice took place in darkness with a single light illuminating an image of Christ crucified.

Jesus's body is without blemish, its muscular purity almost like a blank canvas on which the viewer's imagination can project the welt marks and blood stains that will soon be inflicted.





13 | Jacopo Tintoretto,  
*Christ before Pilate*,  
1566-1567

*Scuola Grande di San Rocco,  
Venice*

Having been delivered to the Roman authorities, Jesus was questioned by Pontius Pilate but remained silent. The Gospels recount how Pilate offered to release a prisoner, apparently a festival custom, and suggested Jesus, but the crowd, incited by their chief priests, cried out instead for Barabbas, a man described by St Mark as a murderer. In turn, Pilate asked the crowd what he was to do with Jesus and their reply came back: "Crucify him!" St Matthew then records that Pilate "took water and washed his hands in full view of the people, saying, 'My hands are clean of this man's blood; see to that yourselves.' And with one voice the people cried, 'His blood be on us, and on our children'".

This moment, from where much anti-semitism can be traced in

Western culture, is the one chosen by Tintoretto, an artist from a city that invented the term "ghetto" to describe the special quarter in which the Jewish population lived. This is not to say that Tintoretto's image is notably anti-semitic, indeed Venice was one of the more tolerant cities of early modern Europe, but it does draw attention to an historical problem, namely the presentation of Pilate as a victim of Jewish extremism. The early Christians, facing repression from the Romans for the first three centuries of their new religion, were at pains not to antagonise their persecutors. Shifting the burden of blame for the death of Christ entirely on to the Jews and effectively exonerating Pilate was an obvious help and seems to have influenced the writers of the four Gospels, which are widely held to have been written towards the end of the first century after Jesus's death.

Tintoretto is, therefore, reinforcing the sympathetic portrayal of Pilate from the Gospels, but with the odd

twist. His mob are not baying for blood. Christ is a radiant figure, bound with a rope around his neck and hands but emanating light, unlike Pilate who emerges from the gloom, the top of his head caught by a shaft of light. Pilate is framed by a giant classical triumphal arch, which seems faintly absurd. In the far right-hand corner of the image, a classical building is crumbling. More interestingly, the eye is caught by the column to the right of Pilate. The red marks may be natural to the marble, but few paintings include details that are not considered. As Pilate washes his hands of Christ's blood, Tintoretto seems to imply that although he may not be responsible for Jesus's death, the culture from which he comes – classical and pagan – is bloodstained forever. It would have been a message wholeheartedly endorsed by the Catholic Church of the Counter Reformation, which feared what it saw as the rise of paganism and classicism that had flourished during the Italian Renaissance







## BEHOLD THE MAN

St John's Gospel adds a further episode to the trial, humiliation and conviction of Christ which follows on from his account of the mocking of Jesus. Clad in his crown of thorns and purple robe, Pilate brings him out before the crowd and utters the words "Behold the Man", or *Ecce Homo* in Latin, a phrase which remained in broad usage even after the Bible was translated into the vernacular throughout Europe from the late fifteenth century onwards.



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Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple cloak. "Behold the Man!" said Pilate.

JOHN 19:4

### 14 | Hieronymus Bosch, *Christ Mocked (The Crowning with Thorns)*, c. 1490-1500

National Gallery, London

This picture, by the Netherlandish painter Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516), portrays the continued humiliation of Christ described by St Matthew and St Mark. After Pilate handed him over to be crucified, Mark recounts that the soldiers took him inside the courtyard of the Governor's headquarters and then "dressed him in purple, and plaiting a crown of thorns, placed it on his head. Then they began to salute him with, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' They beat him about the head with a cane and spat upon him, and then knelt and paid mock homage to him".

Bosch was both a fantasist and a moraliser, whose work here has been likened to a filmic freeze-frame but perhaps more resembles a

fleeting nasty moment in a medieval passion play.

The purple robe has faded, which gives Jesus a slightly ghostly or otherworldly quality that somehow enhances the grisliness of his four tormentors. Starting with the top left-hand figure who slams the crown on to Christ's head with an iron-clad fist, the men read as caricatures of human weakness or failure. The figure in the top right wears a spiked dog collar as if to stress that he is no better than a savage dog; below him, and clad in the robes of a contemporary merchant, is the embodiment of greed and covetousness, a man who feels the quality of Christ's robe with a manic expression on his face; and finally, to his left, the figure in the red head dress with the crescent moon of Islam clearly visible, an unbelieving and deluded old man who reflects the continuing unease about other faiths in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

### 15 | Mark Wallinger, *Ecce Homo*, 2000

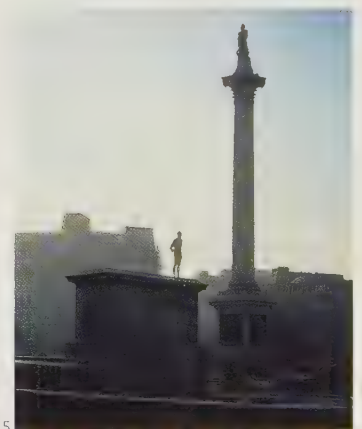
*Fourth Plinth Project, Trafalgar Square, London*

Many great artists have produced a version of *Ecce Homo*, among them Titian and Rembrandt, but one of the most poignant was created by the rather lesser known British sculptor, Mark Wallinger, in 2000 for the empty plinth in Trafalgar Square. Wallinger made a cast directly from the body of his studio assistant using resin mixed with white marble dust. There was no royal robe, but rather a simple towel around his waist and a crown made of gold-plated barbed wire. This life-sized figure was then placed on a plinth four times its size, confronting the crowded chaos of one of the largest and most populated cities on the planet.

Wallinger's *Ecce Homo* was modest and moving. It blended into its surroundings but stood out in honest simplicity, a contrast to the bombast of so many public monuments. The art world response was very positive, a rare case of traditionalists and champions of more cutting-edge art finding cause for agreement. The broader public was also touched by the work, which struck a universal chord because of its humanity in scale and content. Some were perturbed by the fact that the sculpture was "unChrist-like", by which they meant it didn't

resemble the traditional bearded image of Jesus that has almost been burned into the Western imagination over the past 2,000 years by artists – a reaction that reinforces the power of art in the telling of the Easter story.

Wallinger's art often challenges human belief systems, and religion in particular, in a world where some



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question more than ever before while others remain entrenched in a position that is more fundamentalist. Asked about his *Ecce Homo*, he was both personal and political: "Whether or not we regard Jesus as a deity, he was at the very least a political leader of an oppressed people. For me the sculpture alludes to the recent historical past and its sad record of religious and racial intolerance."





XIV THE BODY OF JESUS IS LAID IN THE TOMB



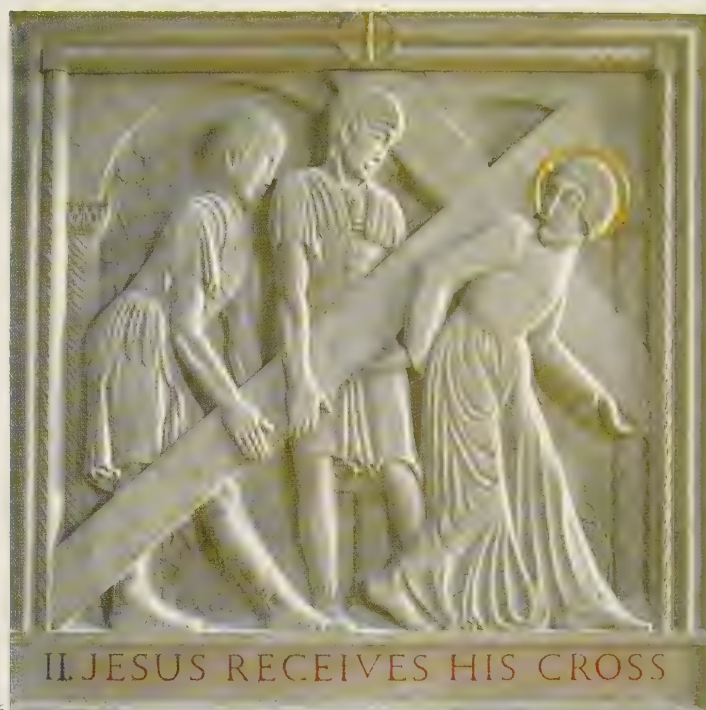
## THE ROAD TO CALVARY

After his conviction for blasphemy by Pilate, a capital offence under Jewish law, Christ was sentenced to the ultimate Roman punishment, that of crucifixion. This ritualised and humiliating death involved the carrying of the cross on which the prisoner was to be nailed to the place of execution, in Jesus's case Golgotha, from the Hebrew meaning "place of a skull" and often referred to in its Latinized form, Calvary.

Christ's tortuous last journey to Calvary has become among the most familiar of all aspects of his Passion, not least because it has been visited by millions over the centuries, both literally and metaphorically. During the Middle Ages the desire grew in the West for a closer identification with the suffering of Jesus, which led many to make the long and dangerous pilgrimage to the holy sites in Jerusalem. There, under the guidance of the Franciscan custodians, the pilgrims could walk along what was known as the Via Dolorosa (the Sorrowful Way) or Via Crucis (Way of the Cross) and retrace Christ's final steps. Various locations along the route were marked with crosses, numbering 22 but later reduced to fourteen, which became points of devotion and

prayer corresponding to the following episodes: 1) Christ is condemned by Pilate; 2) Christ is laden with his cross; 3) he falls for the first time; 4) he meets his mother; 5) Simon of Cyrene is forced to help him with the cross; 6) Veronica wipes Christ's face with her veil; 7) he falls for the second time; 8) Christ meets the women of Jerusalem; 9) he falls for the third time; 10) he is stripped of his garments; 11) he is nailed to the cross; 12) Christ dies on the cross; 13) his body is taken down from the cross; 14) Christ is laid in the sepulchre.

When it later became increasingly difficult to visit these sites because of the Moslem conquest of Jerusalem, the route was effectively brought back to Christendom and displayed in churches throughout Europe in what became known as the Stations of the Cross, a pictorial reconstruction of the road to Calvary. These devotional images, called Stations because they were always confronted standing, began to flourish in the fifteenth century but have remained evident in churches of numerous Christian denominations up to the present day.



16

# CRUCIFIXION

As they lead him away to execution they seized upon a man called Simon, from Cyrene, on his way in from the country, put the cross on his back and made him walk behind Jesus carrying it. Great numbers of people followed, many women among them, who mourned and lamented over him. Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; no, weep for yourselves and your children."

LUKE 23:26

### 16 Eric Gill, *Stations of the Cross*, 1913-1918

*Westminster Cathedral, London*

The English sculptor Eric Gill (1882-1940) produced these *Stations of the Cross* soon after his conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1913. The fourteen panels, each around five square feet and carved in low relief from Hoptonwood stone, were made *in situ* in Westminster Catholic Cathedral in London. They are mounted well above eye level on the massive brick piers of the nave and tell the story of the last journey with something of the directness of good sign posting. Gill was both a sculptor and a typographic designer who sought to bring the experiences of art and life together whenever he could. He subsequently remarked that he wanted them to be seen "less as works of art than furniture".

Gill used himself as the model for the figure of Jesus in the tenth Station and for the soldier in the second, partly

an identification of the artist with his subject matter and the zeal of the newly converted, but also because he needed a variety of models from which to draw before transferring the images to stone with a deft use of his hammer and chisel.

Alongside their simplicity, these *Stations of the Cross* have an austere quality which some critics likened to medieval art and others saw as primitive. This reflected a strong desire among artists at the beginning of the twentieth century to reinvent art from first principles, as if side-stepping much of the baggage of Western art history. Gill himself said in reply to a disparaging critique of the work that "I stand for a new beginning in stone carving". It is also recorded by Gill's biographers that a woman approached the sculptor after the Stations had been unveiled in Westminster Cathedral and told him that she thought they were "not nice carvings", to which he replied with characteristic directness: "It is not a nice subject."



## 17 | Domenikos Theotokopoulos, known as El Greco, *The Disrobing of Christ*, 1577-1579

### *Toledo Cathedral*

Individual scenes from the Stations of the Cross also became the basis for large commissions, such as this painting by the Greek-born Spanish-based artist El Greco (1541-1614). Begun in 1577, it stems from the tenth Station and depicts the moment when Christ is being stripped of his garments before being crucified. The work hangs in the sacristy in Toledo Cathedral where the priests robe and disrobe.

The painting is composed to present a wall of figures, banked up and closing in on Christ, with one pawing at the robe which he hopes to win after the drawing of lots as recorded in all four Gospels. El Greco takes artistic licence with the colour of the robe – red for the bloodshed to come rather than the mock-majesterial purple that the evangelists describe. In the foreground, a young man gouges out the holes into which the nails will be driven, a subtle reminder of the brutalities to come. To his left, and orchestrating the emotional tone of the painting, are the three Marys. There are various references to the women at the

Crucifixion in the Gospels, but the one favoured by artists tends to come from St John's account where, in addition to Mary Magdalene and Mary Cleophas and instead of Mary the mother of St James, he has Christ's mother present. Like numerous artists before and since, El Greco uses the Virgin Mary as a figure with whom many seek to empathise as she contemplates the horror of watching the child she brought into the world about to die.

Ironically, El Greco was accused by the warden of Toledo Cathedral of impropriety for his prominent inclusion of the three Marys and for failing to make Christ's head the dominant feature of the painting, thereby violating the new visual orthodoxy of the Counter Reformation. A long battle ensued and although the artist's fee was reduced, the work remained untainted by such pious pedantry.

## 18 | Sacro Monte

### *Varallo, northern Italy*

In 1491 a Franciscan monk, Bernardino Caimi, decided to take the idea of the Stations of the Cross a stage further, recreating Christ's entire life three-dimensionally in a series of chapels in Varallo in the foothills of the Alps. Caimi had previously been rector of the holy sites in Jerusalem and his aim was to re-present the experience of those sacred places in what he described as the New Jerusalem. Working with an artist called Gaudenzio Ferrari and a team of assistants, Caimi began to realise a dream that would finally be completed in 1765, more than two centuries after his death.

There are 44 chapels spread out over the hillside, each representing an episode in the Christian story, from the Original Sin to the Risen Christ, depicted by more than 600 sculptures and more than 4,000 painted figures.

Varallo is one of the lesser known treasures of Christian art; a theatre and sacred theme park in the mountains full of the brilliant and the bizarre in equal measure. At the heart of the place is Christ's journey to Calvary, beginning with a full-scale recreation of the steps from Pilate's Praetorian Palace down which the visitor can walk as if following in the holy footsteps, then moving on to contemplate

a tableau of the sixth Station of the Cross where Jesus is comforted by St Veronica as he stumbles under the weight of his wooden burden. There is no reference to this in the Gospels, but according to *Apocryphal Acts* (from the fourth century) and books of popular devotion such as the *Golden Legend* (from the twelfth century), Veronica wiped Christ's face with her veil and from this a true likeness (or "vera icon", hence perhaps her name) was made.

The figures, some made from wood and others from terracotta, painted and often clothed in fabric, taunt Jesus in a scene that is brash and theatrical. Most striking of all is a small man behind Veronica who brandishes a stick, his eyes contorted with rage. Under his chin is a grotesque growth, a goitre resulting from a swollen thyroid gland due to iodine deficiency, which was common in the mountainous region of northern Italy where sea salt was in short supply. In this respect the Sacro Monte is localised in much of its detail but universal in its broad vision – an attempt by Caimi and his successors to bring Christ's journey to death back to life as directly as they thought possible.



After nailing him to the cross they divided his clothes among them by casting lots.

MATTHEW 27:35





18



18



# ON THE CROSS

The image of Christ on the cross has become the most potent subject of Christian art. Crucifixion was a deliberately brutal form of execution practised all over the ancient world in Assyria, Persia, Egypt, Carthage, Macedonia and Greece, but most notoriously in Rome. Throughout the Roman Empire it was used as the ultimate form of punishment for slaves and non-Romans (which is why St Peter was crucified and St Paul was beheaded, the latter being a Roman citizen). In 73 BC, more than 6,000 followers of Spartacus were crucified along the road to Damascus. Not only was it devised to be extremely painful but also to humiliate the victim, who was stripped, whipped with spiked thongs and then made to carry the bar of the cross to the place of execution, where he hung exposed for several hours before death finally occurred.

Crucifixion was finally abolished by the Romans in the fourth century by the Emperor Constantine, who, legend has it, converted to Christianity after being confronted by a vision of a cross of light in the sky accompanied by the words "*In hoc signo vinces*" – "In this sign conquer". From then on, it is fair to say, crucifixion became the central symbol of what was to become the most dominant religion in the world for the next 1,000 years or more.



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## 19 | Crucifixion from *Scenes from Christ's Passion*, Roman ivory plaques made between 420 and 430

*British Museum, London*

This is the earliest known surviving representation of Christ on the cross, an ivory relief probably used to decorate the sides of a small casket produced around 420. As we have seen, the early Christians were not prolific makers of images, partly as a consequence of their Judaic roots and also because of the continuing threat of persecution from the Romans. They were particularly reluctant to depict Jesus crucified, preferring to show their Lord triumphantly having conquered death after the Resurrection. The idea of the suffering Christ was a painful one to contemplate, particularly when the threat of crucifixion was rife. It was also widely seen as a shameful form of death, a punishment for convicted

criminals, and was not therefore the strongest selling point for the numerous missionaries who sought to convert others to their religion. Only when Christianity was beginning firmly to take root were the followers of Christ able to come to terms with the visual nature of his death on the cross.

This image shows the crucified Christ together with John and Mary to the left and the centurion to the right who, according to St Mark, cried out "Truly, this was the son of God" straight after Jesus had died. The soldier's arm is raised in defiant proclamation and Christ himself is strong and upright even in death, his body bearing no sign of suffering and his eyes wide open as if to show he will rise again. To the extreme left is Judas, hanging from a tree having committed suicide after his betrayal of Jesus, his pouch of 30 pieces of silver spilling out underneath him. This is a rare instance throughout Western art of Christ and Judas being shown together in death in the same picture,

but it serves to reinforce the triumphal nature of the image. In the toppling tree from which Judas ignominiously hangs, a bird nourishes her young on a branch that reaches out towards the cross, here presented as the Tree of Life. It is a carefully conceived, contrasting carved image and an early indication that Christianity, in facing up to death by crucifixion, is beginning to feel secure and confident.





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**20 | Mathis Neithardt-Gothardt, known as Grünewald, *Crucifixion from the Isenheim Altarpiece*, 1510-1516**

*Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar*

There are numerous images of Christ crucified in Western art, but none, perhaps, can rival this one in terms of torment, agony and disturbing impact. It was painted by an artist about whom little is known, even his name – scholars now generally agree that it was Mathis Neithardt-Gothardt, but he remains more widely known as Mathis Grünewald.

The Crucifixion was painted as part of an elaborately folding altarpiece for the monastery of St Antony in Isenheim, Alsace, which was broken up during the French Revolution and eventually reassembled in a museum in nearby Colmar. In the various configurations of its panels being opened, the altarpiece makes visible depictions of the Nativity, the Annunciation and the Resurrection (as well as a triumphal image of St Antony), but closed up it offers the full, harrowing experience of the Crucifixion as told in St John's Gospel, but with Grünewald's own interpretation very much to the fore.

Christ's body is violently contorted. His hands resemble the gnarled

branches of a withered tree and also eerily echo the crown of thorns jammed on his head and drawing a steady trickle of blood down his face and torso. His feet are further twisted against the angle of the torso, pirouetted in a macabre dance of death around a single nail from which blood drips on to the platform below. To the left, the Virgin Mary collapses into the arms of St John the Evangelist, her hands clasped in prayer and despair. Beneath the cross, Mary Magdalene kneels in supplication, her hands contorted as if identifying with those of Jesus nailed to the cross. To the right, anachronistically so, given that he was beheaded years before, is St John the Baptist holding the scriptures and pointing to Christ. Behind his hand, emerging out of the blackness and written in blood red paint, are the words: "He must become greater; I must become less." This formed part of John the Baptist's prophetic testimony about the role of Jesus to his disciples soon after the baptism of Christ and is visually emphasised by Grünewald, who makes Jesus larger than John even though perspective dictates that he should be smaller, being slightly further away.

Standing at John's feet is a lamb, blood gushing from its heart into a chalice, the symbolism of both sacrifice and communion plain to see and reiterating the words that John

first uttered when he saw Jesus: "Behold the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world."

But the painting has a specific meaning and intention beyond the broad symbolism of Christ as the sacrificial lamb who died to save sinners. Contemplate his body again and look closely at the skin: covered in sores and lesions, its blackening green hue almost giving off the odour of putrefaction. The Antonine Order of monks had a reputation for tending the sick, notably those with severe skin diseases, stemming from the story of St Antony's time in the Egyptian desert where demonic wild animals were said to have clawed at his skin. Grünewald's altarpiece was created for a chapel in the hospital of the monastery where lepers were cared for. The image of the suffering Christ would have had a deep resonance for the severely afflicted people who were taken to pray in front of the work; made to confront their own suffering and to understand that through the suffering of Jesus, and by extension themselves, they might be saved. This notion that suffering is a necessary part of salvation is still one of the defining characteristics of Christianity, both Protestant and Catholic, and one which differentiates it from most other religions. In Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece it finds one of its most potent and disturbing expressions.



## 21 | Jacopo Tintoretto, *Crucifixion*, 1565

*Scuola Grande di San Rocco,  
Venice*

After the Reformation there was a marked decline in religious art in Protestant northern Europe, but as the Catholic Church began to fight back, art was used as a form of visual propaganda in the Counter Reformation and artistic commissions became bigger, bolder and more ambitious, particularly in Italy. This work by Jacopo Tintoretto is one of the most spectacular of all images of the Crucifixion, a work to rank alongside that of Grünewald but with a broader, more universal appeal.

When El Greco saw it for the first time he proclaimed it to be the greatest work he had ever encountered. John Ruskin, the eminent Victorian writer and critic and a man rarely lost for words, was rendered almost speechless, declaring that it was "above all praise".

The power of the picture lies in its panoramic vastness, a piece of sacred drama unfolding across a 40 foot canvas and filling an entire wall of the Sala dell'Albergo at the Scuola di San Rocco. Christ is in the centre of a grand ellipse: the still, calm pivot of the painting around which everything seems slowly to rotate. He appears to be at his lowest ebb, about to be fed

vinegar from a sponge, which occurred just before his death in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. But the image remains a triumphant one with Jesus emanating light and energy as if to proclaim that he will conquer death.

The epic nature of the painting is enhanced by a series of small episodes which draw the eye backwards and forwards across the canvas. Framing the scene at the left and right-hand edges are onlookers dressed in the clothes of the wealthy contemporary Venetian elite. In contrast, and giving a counter-thrust to the drama, are the men pulling at the ropes to elevate the cross to the right of Christ, themselves recognisable as Venetian workers. Crouching in a small stone cubbyhole in the foreground to the right of the central cross, two men play dice for Christ's garments. Most striking of all of these vignettes, though, are the other two crucifixions being staged. Here, Tintoretto conflates the Gospel of St Luke, which portrays the two criminals facing execution as good and bad; believing and unbelieving. Rather than attempting to depict the mockery of Christ by one and the request for him to "remember me when you come into your kingdom" by the other, as the three men hung side by side on their crosses, Tintoretto opts for something more subtle and perhaps more powerful: to the right, the "bad" thief struggles as he is nailed

down, his back turned away from Jesus; to the left, the "good" thief strains to look at Christ as his cross is raised and it is clear that he has seen the light. In this way, the artist conveys both the physical process of crucifixion in three almost diagrammatic stages and the spiritual process of enlightenment and salvation.

Finally, in the central foreground of the painting are the mourners, including the three Marys and St John, as so often the case bringing the viewer into the picture (and with Tintoretto locating himself in the scene: the bearded man in the dark robe who leans towards the cross on the right-hand side of the dice players). But perhaps more interestingly, these mourners do something odd to the spatial perceptions of the viewer. They obscure where the foot of the cross is rooted in the ground, giving it an ambiguous appearance of floating in thin air. Above, Christ has his head bent forward and tucked underneath the top edge of the frame, his outstretched arms on the cross creating a sense of depth beyond, but with his body straining forward as if he is about to burst forth from the picture plain. In this respect he seems very much of our world, but, surrounded by a supernatural light and hovering in an ethereal space, he also appears to be in a completely different world.





One of the criminals who hung there with him taunted him: "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us." But the other rebuked him: "Have you no fear of God? You are under the same sentence as he. For us it is plain justice; we are paying the price for our misdeeds; but this man has done nothing wrong."

LUKE 23:39



22



## 22 | Marc Chagall, *Crucifixion*, 1943

Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris  
Christianity's Jewish roots have often been played down over the centuries, a rather unsavoury mixture of endemic European anti-semitism and the desire of the various Christian churches to stress the uniqueness of their religion. But Jesus lived and died as a Jew and the Gospels of Mark and Matthew recount that as he hung from the cross he recited the words from Jewish scriptures, from the twenty second Psalm of David in fact: "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabuchthani*" ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me") – a moment that seems to have inspired this work by the twentieth-century Russian painter Marc Chagall (1887-1985). Born of an Hasidic Jewish family in Vitebsk, western Russia, Chagall went to Paris in 1914 and developed a style of painting which fuses Russian folk art with French Fauvism, where simplified, colourful forms create a sophisticated

dream-like world of personal memory with universal resonance.

This image was painted in America after the artist had managed to escape from the Nazi occupation of Paris. It shows a strongly Jewish Christ who wears prayer straps on his left arm and brandishes the scroll of the Torah in his right hand. On his head, he wears a phylactery of a devout Jew containing strips of parchment inscribed with Old Testament texts. In the distance, people are fleeing from their villages, recalling the pogroms in eastern Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the mass exodus of Jews, many to America where Chagall had been forced to flee two years earlier. The painting, therefore, suggests the idea of Jesus as a Jewish martyr and, in a world about to confront the full horrors of the Nazi holocaust, it was a chillingly prophetic work of art.



## 23 Sebastian Horsley, *The Crucifixion*, 2000-2002

*London and the Philippines*

The English artist Sebastian Horsley (b.1962) decided that in order to paint the Crucifixion as directly and effectively as possible he had to undergo the physical process itself. So, in August 2000, he was nailed to a cross in the village of San Pedro Kutud in the Pampanga province of the Philippines.

The practice of crucifixion has become prevalent, if not exactly widespread, in Pampanga over the past four decades, beginning in 1961 with a faith healer called Arsenio Añoza. Since then more than 300 Filipino men and women have undergone the ritual both to bring themselves closer to Christ and as the result of a vow (*panata*) with God that if they suffer this form of self-sacrifice, a sick relative may be healed.

The ritual, from which no-one has yet died, is not sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines, but is indicative of a form of religious fervour dubbed "Calvary Catholicism" on account of its emphasis on the suffering of Christ. Appropriately enough, it takes place on Good Friday, the culmination of a series of acts of self-inflicted violence including self-flagellation by hundreds of individuals along with the dozen or so who are to be crucified. The events draw large crowds and have even been sponsored by big business. In 1994 the first foreigner underwent crucifixion, but after a Japanese porn star had himself filmed on the cross for commercial purposes two years later, outsiders have been banned. Consequently, Horsley had a difficult

time persuading the organisers to let him be crucified, but eventually it was agreed that it would be a private ceremony which did not coincide with the main Easter ritual.

Horsley was accompanied to the Philippines by the photographer Dennis Morris and the artist Sarah Lucas, who filmed the event. The cross was laid flat, Horsley's hands were rubbed in alcohol, he lay down and his arms were strapped to the horizontal wooden bar. Then two three-inch nails were driven through his palms and the cross was elevated, his feet resting on a wooden platform. The artist passed out in pain and the wooden platform broke, apparently weakened by rain. Fortunately, the wrist straps also gave and instead of having his hands ripped, Horsley fell off. A month or so later, when his hands had begun to heal, he began to paint a series of canvases of the Crucifixion, effectively from the inside out.

"Being crucified took me to a place where I felt isolated and alone," the artist later observed, and his pictures try to convey that sensation with a simple cross visible against a dark enveloping background.

There are many who accuse Horsley of sensationalism and showmanship; there are others who point out that the paintings are hardly major achievements. But, as Horsley himself says, in a long history of images of the Crucifixion few if any have ever painted "from an intimate knowledge of what it is like to go through it". In this respect, at least, his work is original.



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By now it was midday and a darkness fell over the whole land, which lasted until three in the afternoon; the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus gave a loud cry and said, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit"; and with these words he died.

LUKE 23 44



23



# THE BODY OF CHRIST

From the moment in the Last Supper when Christ breaks bread with the words "This is my body which is given for you" to his death on the cross, the focus of the story has been on his body. As we have seen, it has been scourged, mocked, stripped and finally crucified. The centrality of the body and the emphasis on its corporeal presence is nowhere more carnally expressed than in the work of Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640).

Rubens is, for many, the most impressive painter of human flesh; a Protestant by birth whose family pragmatically converted to Catholicism as persecution raged against the Reformation in the Catholic Spanish Netherlands, notably in Antwerp where Rubens lived. Among his most significant works are two paintings which now hang in Antwerp Cathedral: *The Raising of the Cross* and *The Descent from the Cross*, here explored together and subsequently contrasted with a picture they directly inspired by Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1609-1669), the Dutch Calvinist rival to Rubens and arguably the greatest Protestant painter who ever lived.

## 24 | Peter Paul Rubens, *The Raising of the Cross*, 1610-1611

*Antwerp Cathedral*

Although it was painted as a triptych, Rubens's first great masterpiece in Antwerp reads as a continuous image, an energised struggle to elevate the cross, set not against the traditionally spacious backdrop of Golgotha, but a dark, craggy rock face. This gives the scene a claustrophobic quality that enhances the physical and seemingly luminous presence of Christ's body.

Aside from the contrast of darkness and light, the work also suggests chaos and calm; straining energy and emotional restraint. The Virgin Mary and John (set back in the left-hand panel) remain quiet and dignified, a far cry from the swooning gestures of Grünewald and other numerous depictions of their grief in the face of impending adversity. Counter Reformation theologians had decreed that no discernible weakness should be shown among the mourners of Christ's death, and here Rubens extends that emphatically to the figure of Jesus, muscular and heroic even as his agonising execution begins.

The picture was initially painted for the church of St Walburga (since destroyed) close to the docks. Some historians have noted that the men wrestling with the cross, hauling it

up with a rope, do so in a way which resembles a ship's crew trying to raise a mainsail – an image which would have resonated with the sailors and dockers who formed a significant part of the congregation. It would have made the scene seem even more real, implicating the viewer with the Crucifixion itself.

The painting was made to tower over the main altar, which was raised up on a large dais approached by nineteen stone steps. In this context, at St Walburga's church, a work dealing with the idea of elevation was substantially elevated itself. Today, hanging as it does in a chapel to the left of the main altar at Antwerp Cathedral and experienced more intimately at eye level, it seems more confrontationally imposing and suggests in a very explicit way the full physical weight of Christ's body and, by extension, the metaphorical weight of his sacrifice.











## 26 Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *The Descent from the Cross*, 1633

*Alte Pinakothek, Munich*

This work is partly a homage to Rubens and partly Rembrandt's assertion of his own artistic and religious vision. It was commissioned by Prince Frederik Hendrik, Stadtholder of the Netherlands, in 1633 as part of a series of private devotional images along with a version of *The Raising of the Cross*.

The scale of Rembrandt's painting is much smaller, less than a quarter of the size of Rubens's version, and consequently it is tauter and in many ways more intensified. The backdrop is a murky Jerusalem and the scene is bathed in a mysterious light. The composition is close to that of Rubens, but the mood is not. Christ's body looks utterly broken, drained of life, a frail dead human being rather than a muscular, idealised hero.

In Rubens's work, the emphasis is on action and reaction. All the figures are in direct contact with Christ's body. In Rembrandt's image, the stress is on contemplation and witness, with only three figures touching the body and with the onlookers at a respectable distance. This reflects fundamental differences in Protestant and Catholic

theology. While the latter believed in salvation through good deeds and actions, the former believed in the idea, as Luther put it, of "justification by faith alone", or, put another way, salvation was dependent on believing rather than doing. In Rembrandt's painting, the doers are replaced by the watchers. Furthermore, Rembrandt's own form of Protestantism – Calvinism – proposed the notion of collective responsibility for Christ's sacrifice, a heavy burden of shared guilt. Each figure watching, the painting seems to be saying, is responsible – all of those who bear witness to the scene, both inside the picture and outside, not least the painter himself. For Rembrandt, the most prolific and accomplished of all self-portraitists, has included himself in his work, clad in blue and helping to lower the body, his face a shadowed mask of horrified grief in an image which seeks to show more the human aspect of the story than the divine.

There came a man of Arimathea,  
Joseph by name, who was a man of  
means, and had himself approached  
Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus.

MATTHEW 27:57

## 25 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Descent from the Cross*, 1611-1614

*Antwerp Cathedral*

The physical weight of Christ's body is the central force of Rubens's *The Descent from the Cross*, a jump-cut continuation of the narrative of crucifixion and a reversal of emphasis from elevation to descent.

The painting shows the dead Jesus being lowered into a sheet or shroud for burial. At the top right-hand corner, the same white-bearded old man who Rubens depicted elevating the cross now strains to hold the corpse as he leans over the wooden crossbar and clenches the shroud between his teeth to help to support the dead weight. At the opposite end of the image, the three Marys reach out to help, a wisp of Mary Magdalene's hair trapped beneath the foot of Christ which she recently washed with the very same blonde locks. Nicodemus, clad in a dark blue robe, and Joseph of Arimathea,

fully bearded and wearing a red silk cap, are also shown to be present, the dissenting members of the Jewish establishment who wanted to ensure that Jesus was properly buried. Together with St John the Evangelist, wearing his customary red robe, these figures complete a compositional format which evokes a diagonal cross but with the emphasis downwards, as if to suggest the life force having drained away.

Even in death Christ's body seems strong and heroic. The muscular figure was partly inspired by the *Laocoön*, the celebrated ancient sculpture showing the Trojan priest and his two sons in mortal struggle with monstrous snakes, which was excavated in Rome at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Having seen the statue, Rubens was clearly inspired by it, but he also seemed determined to subvert it by overlaying an icon of classical pagan culture with a triumphant vision of Catholic Christianity.

The two flanking panels seem,

unlike those in *The Raising of the Cross*, to have no relation to the central image, and certainly they are not part of a continuous panorama. But closer scrutiny tells a different story. On the left, the heavily pregnant Virgin Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, also pregnant and pointing to her womb which carries the embryonic John the Baptist. On the right, the infant Christ is presented in the temple to the High Priest Simeon, and on the back of the panels, visible when the altarpiece is closed, is an image of St Christopher, the "Christ-bearer", carrying the baby Jesus on his shoulders. And that is the unifying theme to the work – the idea of bearing the body of Christ. As if to reinforce this notion, the work resides above an altar in a side chapel to the right of the main altar in Antwerp Cathedral, precisely where Rubens intended it to be. As Communion is given, the bread and wine are proffered with Rubens's monumental image of the body and blood of Christ directly behind and in vision.



## MATERNAL GRIEF

The most poignant aspect of the depiction of the mourning which takes place both during the Crucifixion and afterwards as the body is taken down is the grief of Christ's mother. Painted versions of what is referred to as the Lamentation were relatively widespread throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, the most celebrated of which is Giotto's in the Arena Chapel in Padua. Here the Virgin seems overwhelmed by loss, her face stricken with sadness as she contemplates the body of her dead son in a way never seen before in Western religious art. Scenes depicting the Lamentation involve the other mourners mentioned in the various accounts from the Gospels, and although Mary's grief is not specifically described at this point, it is clearly there by implication. More imaginatively conceived, however, is the idea of the *pietà*, a sculptural form which isolates mother and son, Mary and the dead Christ, in an image that is intensely moving. The form emerged as a devotional one in Spain in the thirteenth century and then spread to Italy over the next century, hence its name, which means "pity" or "mercy" in Italian. Still hardly commonplace, in 1498 the *pietà* began to take on its most celebrated marble state at the hands of a young sculptor from Florence – Michelangelo.

### 27 | Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Pietà*, 1498-1499

*St Peter's Cathedral, Vatican*

This work was produced when Michelangelo (1475-1564) was barely 24 and is itself seemingly suspended in a state of eternal youth. It was commissioned by a French cardinal, Jean Bilhères de Lagraulas, the French ambassador to the Holy See, who wanted a sculpture for his own tomb in the church of St Petronella. In the contract it was stipulated that it should be so well crafted that "no living artist could better it", and Michelangelo stuck by the agreement in producing a work that has rarely – if ever – been surpassed in the history of devotional sculpture.

Mary holds the lifeless body of the son she gave birth to three decades or so earlier, invariably evoking endless pictures of the Nativity and the numerous paintings of the Madonna and Child. Her eyes look downwards at Jesus, half closed and focusing attention both on the physical body and the act of inner contemplation. The expression on her face is calm and restrained, where resignation is transformed into serenity, her left hand held outwards in a gesture of display rather than sorrow, an absorbing image in content and effect. There is something almost miraculous

about the way that the marble is transformed from an inert material into something close to living – and dead – flesh, and the sculpture is utterly convincing as a representation of human life and lifelessness. Its only flaw, an intended one and part of the widespread idealisation of the Virgin Mary, is that she seems younger than her son.

The work, incidentally, is the only sculpture signed by Michelangelo, with the words MICHELANGELO BUONARROTUS FIORENTINUS FACIEBAT (Michelangelo the Florentine made this) prominently carved on the sash across the Virgin's breast. According to his biographer, the sculptor overheard visitors to the church asking who had made it and later returned with his hammer and chisel to leave no-one in any doubt. The sculpture now resides in the most famous church in the world, St Peter's in the Vatican, a monument to restrained maternal grief and to the artist who created it.

# RESURRECTION







## 28 | Sam Taylor-Wood, *Pietà*, 2001

*White Cube Gallery, London*

Michelangelo's marble masterpiece was the direct inspiration for this work by the British artist Sam Taylor-Wood (b.1967). Over the past decade, she has utilised a variety of different media, mainly photography, film and video, to explore themes ranging from personal mortality to the decadent world of contemporary celebrity – including a re-staging of Leonardo's *Last Supper* as a modern-day dinner party.

In 2001 Taylor-Wood was invited to go to Hollywood to make a pop video for Elton John's latest release, *I Want Love*, and requested that the actor in the short film be Robert Downey Jr, who was serving time in a Californian correctional centre for drug and alcohol abuse. Having completed the video and struck up a close rapport, the artist and actor wanted to try to make a work

together. Taylor-Wood had recently been to Rome and, with Michelangelo's *Pietà* very much in her mind, decided to recreate the sculpture. Holding Downey across her lap for ten minutes or so, she both filmed and photographed the pose. This is one of the resulting images.

On a superficial level, it can be read as an indulgent experiment, but it is more poignant than that if one looks a little deeper. Downey was a troubled individual who had come close to death through his addiction, while Taylor-Wood had herself just recovered from a second bout of cancer, as well as having recently become a mother. Here, therefore, is the image of a survivor: a strong young woman shown caring for a man who – as the electronic tag on his ankle reminds us – is actually being taken care of by the state. Reinforced by rather than subverting Michelangelo's work, it also reads as a contemporary artistic affirmation of the nurturing power of motherhood.



## BURYING THE BODY

### 29 | Simone Martini, *Entombment*, c.1340

*Gemäldegalerie, Berlin*

The Gospels all state that Christ was buried late on the Friday because, as St John explained, "the Jews were anxious that the bodies [of all three crucified men] should not remain on the cross for the coming Sabbath, since that Sabbath was a day of great solemnity". Likewise, all four accounts describe the involvement of Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the Sanhedrin who did not agree with the execution of Jesus and who sought Pilate's permission to bury the body. Once again, though, it is St John's Gospel that gives an expanded description, with Nicodemus – another member of the Sanhedrin and a secret disciple of Christ – and the three Marys all present: "They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen cloth according to Jewish burial-customs. Now at the place where he had been crucified was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, not yet used for burial. There, because the tomb was near at hand and it was the eve of the Jewish Sabbath, they laid Jesus."

The Sienese master Simone Martini (c.1284–1344) produced this elaborate image of the burial of Christ for a tiny two-sided devotional panel known as the Orsini Polyptych. One side showed the Annunciation, the other the Passion. The commission was a private one, thought to have been made when the painter was living in Avignon for the last five years of his life.

The scene is vividly colourful and, by the conventions of medieval art, intensely dramatic. A wailing crowd surges in from the left and on the right Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus stand at the foot of the tomb, embalming the body in accordance with Jewish custom. At the heart of the work is the image of Mary embracing her son for the last time. The pictorial emphasis is initially horizontal but subsequently vertical, with the corpse about to be lowered into an intricately carved sarcophagus unlike anything described in the Gospels. In fact, the whole painting echoes this decoratively patterned form, part of an ornate, courtly style of art known as the International Gothic. Its impact stems from a carefully conceived colour scheme, notably the lavishly painted haloes which seem to suggest that grief is an out of body experience.





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They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen cloth according to Jewish burial-customs.

JOHN 19:40



31



### 30 | Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Entombment*, c.1500-1501

| National Gallery, London

Michelangelo's *Entombment* was made almost two centuries after Simone Martini's and in it the emotional temperature is much lower. The work is both an instructive view of how the young artist produced his paintings and a visual game of hide and seek because it is unfinished.

It is believed to have been commissioned for an altarpiece in a funerary chapel in the church of Sant' Agostino in Rome and was the largest painting in his career to date. Christ's body is being lifted up prior to being carried off to the tomb in the distance, a gesture that is both real and suggestive of a narrative, and one which is in keeping with purely devotional paintings where the body is elaborately presented for contemplation. The greenish hue evokes death and the onset of decay. St John and Joseph of Arimathea are most clearly recognisable and the three women, whose features have been painted with some detail, have been identified by most scholars as the three Marys. A sketch for the painting suggests that the figure in the bottom left-hand corner was intended to be depicted holding the crown of thorns and the nails. In the bottom right-hand corner, only the ghostly outline has been made of the Virgin Mary. Her robe was almost invariably painted using the most expensive pigment – lapis lazuli – which was ordered and applied at the end of the painting process.

The work is an example of

Michelangelo's approach centred on the Florentine tradition of *disegno*, where drawing and design are the dominant means of realising an image and colour is, if not quite an afterthought, certainly of secondary importance. In addition, however, the tomb illustrates something of the sculptural process through which he was beginning to make his reputation. Here, the brown paint has been applied to suggest the rocks from which the burial place has been hewn, and Michelangelo in turn has scraped away at the paint as if hacking at stone. Ironically, the reason for the picture remaining incomplete seems to stem from the fact that while working on it he received an illustrious commission back in his home city of Florence to carve a vast marble statue of David.

Like his image of David, Michelangelo's painting of the dead Christ shows him naked. This was almost unprecedented in Western art, with Jesus usually wearing a loin cloth, partly to restore some dignity to a form of execution intended to humiliate and which had, in reality, seen the stripping of prisoners to be crucified. There were also, however, repressive, moral reasons for clothing Christ. Michelangelo spent much of his subsequent career celebrating the beauty of the naked male body in his sacred art, but it seems likely that had he completed this particular painting, the chances of the friars who ran the church accepting it would have been remote, to say the least.

### 31 | Hans Holbein, *The Dead Christ or Christ in his Tomb*, 1521

Öffentliche Kunststammlung,  
Basel

Nothing is left to the imagination in this stark, unrelenting image of Christ in the tomb, paradoxically one of the most life-like depictions of a corpse. It was painted in 1521 by the German-born Hans Holbein (1497/8-1543), who had moved to Basel six years earlier. It was once thought that the picture was intended for an altarpiece, but there is no evidence to support this, nor any to suggest that it was for a private commission. Instead, it seems likely that it was a personal matter – a painting produced out of passionate belief, but which later prompted the great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky to remark that "this picture could rob a man of his faith".

The image is life-sized and composed with accurate but dramatic foreshortening of the body in order to render it real. The vicious and visceral wounds are surrounded by gangrenous flesh and the body is beginning to decompose to the point of putrefaction. The face is rigid, the eyes just open but socket-like and empty all the same. The suggestion is that Holbein used a corpse recently fished out of the Rhine, which runs through Basel, and it certainly seems likely that

he had scrutinised dead bodies in as intense a way as he studied live ones to produce his extraordinary portraits. Moreover, the personal nature of the work is enhanced when one knows that his brother had recently died and his father was seriously ill. But the broader purpose was religious and cultural: Holbein was close to humanist scholars such as Erasmus, whose writings had had a marked impact on the early development of the Reformation – scholars who saw the Bible as a living book made accessible to all through its translation into the vernacular. And it was in this vein that he produced a painting that seemed to say to the viewer: if you can grasp the idea of dead flesh decaying, then the miracle of what lies ahead becomes even more forceful – namely the Resurrection.

Joseph took the body... and laid it in his own unused tomb, which he had cut out of the rock; he then rolled a large stone against the entrance.

NATHAN STUBBS





The Sabbath was over, and it was about daybreak on Sunday, when Mary of Magdala and the other Mary came to look at the grave. Suddenly there was a violent earthquake; an angel of the Lord descended from Heaven; he came to the stone and rolled it away, and sat himself down on it. His face shone like lightening; his garments were white as snow. At the sight of him the guards shook with fear and lay like the dead.

MATTHEW 28:1

## THE DAY OF RESURRECTION

The keystone of Christianity is the Resurrection of Christ. It is attested to by all four Gospels as fact, a physical event, but it is not described. Depending on which account you read, Mary Magdalene and at least one of the other Marys arrive at the tomb and discover that the stone had been rolled back and it is empty. In the Synoptic Gospels, they are confronted by a celestial vision – one angel in Matthew, two in Luke and a “youth... wearing a white robe” in Mark – which tells of Christ’s fate. “You have nothing to fear. I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified,” the angel in St Matthew’s account reassures them. “He is not here; he has been raised again, as he said he would be.”

St John is more prosaic and more personal. After Mary Magdalene has seen the empty tomb she runs back to Peter and John himself, dismayed by what she perceives to be a theft of the body. John arrives first, peers inside but waits for Peter, who enters alone: “He saw the linen wrappings lying, and the napkin which had been over his head, not lying with the wrappings but rolled together in a place by itself. Then the disciple who had reached the tomb first went in too, and he saw and believed; until then he had not

understood the scriptures which showed that he must rise from the dead.”

Early images of the Resurrection reflected the physical fact through the absence of the body, showing the empty tomb and effectively sticking to the Gospel versions. The ivory plaques from around 430 AD depicting Christ’s Passion and including the earliest image of Jesus crucified (see fig 19) also show four incredulous figures gathered around the half open doors of the tomb. By the ninth century, however, artistic licence and the creative imagination had become more evident and the image of Christ breaking out of the tomb began to appear, initially in illuminated manuscripts but eventually in paintings by some of the most illustrious artists in European history.



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### 32 | Mathis Neithardt-Gothardt, known as Grünewald, *The Resurrection from the Isenheim Altarpiece*, 1510-1516

*Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar*

Contemplated as an image on its own, there is something distinctly otherworldly about Grünewald’s version of the Resurrection. Christ floats upwards set against a disc of dense, glowing light, his robe trailing down towards the tomb from which he has just burst. The robe changes colour from the white of a burial shroud through a celestial blue to royal red and heavenly gold, reflecting the idea of transfiguration and dramatic transformation from death to the afterlife. It links the physical world of the tomb, whose lid has been effortlessly brushed aside and in which the soldiers shelter from the explosive force of what has happened, to the celestial sphere that Christ now seems to inhabit. Seen in the broader context of the Isenheim altarpiece, however, and it has a meaning and a purpose that is more of this world.

When the altarpiece (see fig 20) was closed, it revealed one of the most horrifying images of the Crucifixion ever painted, with Jesus a victim of disease, his putrid body contorted

with pain. Once the panels were fully opened, however, as if also suggesting the idea of opening the tomb, the miracle of Resurrection was conveyed. Instead of agony, his face was radiant. Aside from the five wounds, displayed as signs of victory over death, his body is unblemished, his skin glowing and his afflictions gone. To the lepers who were made to confront their own suffering in front of Grünewald’s portrayal of crucifixion, here was an image of hope and salvation. It offered not just the broad view of redemption, of eternal life to those who had lived according to Christ’s teachings (as interpreted by the Catholic Church), but a rather more specific one of suffering alleviated, of the body healed.

In this way, a morbid vision is replaced by a radiant one, amplified through the contrast of light and dark and offering, to those who were being treated at the monastery hospital for which the work was created, a sense of light at the end of the tunnel.





### 33 | Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *The Resurrection of Christ*, 1639

*Alte Pinakothek, Munich*

This work was part of the series that Rembrandt produced for the head of the United Provinces, Prince Frederik Hendrik, beginning in 1633 with *The Raising of the Cross* and *The Descent from the Cross* (fig 26) and finishing with this image in 1639. It shows the difficulties of depicting a scene which, by definition, the artist could never have witnessed and which is not fully described in the Gospels.

Rembrandt takes the passage from St Matthew where Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph first come to look at the tomb: "Suddenly there was a violent earthquake; an angel of the Lord descended from Heaven; he came to the stone and rolled it away; and sat himself down on it. His face shone like

lightning; his garments white as snow. At the sight of him the guards shook with fear and lay like the dead." The two women cower in the extreme right-hand foreground in the painting as the angel looks towards them, telling them, according to Matthew: "You have nothing to fear."

The Biblical account stresses the drama and the explosive nature of the angel's appearance, all of which is conveyed by Rembrandt, who is one of the masters of contrasting light and darkness. In the recently established Protestant tradition, the emphasis was on the Bible as a living book and on the idea of bearing witness, which the artist adheres to. But the painting has a crucial difference from anything found in the Gospels and one which seems at odds with his own religious tendencies: Christ appears from out of the tomb, a tiny figure who holds the side of the stone sarcophagus as if sitting in a bath. It is a faintly ludicrous image, an afterthought inspired both by Rembrandt's teacher – Pieter

Lastman (1538-1633), who had recently died and who had produced a triumphant Catholic vision of the scene – and by Rubens, but which needed to stress what Calvin had stipulated in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, published in 1536. The French reformer and theologian, whose views Rembrandt subscribed to, warned against attempting any likeness of God because "the majesty of God, being too high for human view, must not be corrupted by phantoms which have nothing in common with it". The image of Jesus may not have been of God the Father, but in Catholic Baroque paintings it was often phantom-like as he billowed up from the grave to suggest the celestial mystery of the Resurrection. So Rembrandt tries to accentuate the human quality of Christ, a mortal who has just discovered himself to be immortal, and ends up reminding us that he, the painter, although one of the undisputed masters of Western art, is himself a mere mortal too.



... go to my brothers, and tell them that I am now ascending to my Father and your Father, my God and your God". Mary of Magdala went to the disciples with her news: "I have seen the Lord!"

JOHN 20:1-18

# 34 Stanley Spencer, *The Resurrection*, Cookham, 1923-1927 Tate, London

Christ is not shown in a celestial sphere, nor in a painted evocation of the Holy Sepulchre near Golgotha, in this work by the English painter Stanley Spencer (1891-1959), but rather in the churchyard of Holy Trinity in the small village of Cookham, 50 miles or so up the Thames Valley from London. This was Spencer's parish church in the place where he was born and in which he lived almost all of his life. The painting is one of the most intensely personal and, to a certain extent, eccentric images of the Resurrection ever produced.

Jesus appears holding two babies, enthroned in the church doorway with God the Father standing behind him and leaning over affectionately ruffling his son's hair. Along the wall to the right is a row of Old Testament prophets, including Moses who clutches the Ten Commandments. And all around people are bursting forth from their graves.

The artist himself is twice depicted, as if to emphasise the idiosyncratic nature of the scene. He leans naked against a headstone in the centre of the painting and also lies clothed on the brick tomb in the lower right-hand corner. His wife Hilda Carlene, whom

Spencer married while he was in the process of finishing this work, appears three times, most notably entangled in the ivy-covered tomb in the central foreground nearest the viewer and close to her naked husband and her naked brother Richard, also a painter, who kneels against a headstone next to the spiked fence which temporarily encloses his sister.

Spencer had already begun to paint his series of imagined Biblical events taking place in his village, but this was the largest and most ambitious. He subsequently created an equally monumental vision of the Resurrection as if staged in Port Glasgow just after the Second World War, a powerful but less joyful and intimate image. "In the main they resurrect to such a state of joy that they are content to remain where they are," he commented of the figures in his *Resurrection* at Cookham, a place which seemed like a paradise to Spencer. "Even the punishment of the Bad," he continued, "was to be no more than their coming out of the graves was not so easy as in the case of the Good." This naive but touchingly direct vision blurs the distinction between Heaven and earth and implies that paradise is potentially all around us.





## THE RISEN LORD

The various appearances of Jesus to his friends and disciples – some believing, others doubting – have required less of an imaginative leap for artists, not least because the episodes were recounted in the Gospels to help to prove in a more concrete way the apparent miracle of the Resurrection. The times, locations and specific details of these appearances differ in each account, with Matthew telling only of the bribery by the chief priests of the soldiers guarding the tomb to deny the Resurrection by suggesting that “his disciples came by at night and stole his body while we were asleep”. But Mark and John agree that Christ’s first appearance was to Mary Magdalene.



35

### 35 | Tiziano Vecellio, known as Titian, *Noli me Tangere*, 1510-1515

National Gallery, London

There is no sign of Golgotha nor even the tomb in this light and airy image painted by the Venetian maestro Titian (c.1487-1576) early in his career. It is set on Easter morning just outside the Holy Sepulchre, where Mary Magdalene had gone only to discover Christ’s body was missing. St John describes how, after her confrontation with two angels, she turned away weeping and saw Jesus standing there. Thinking him to be the gardener, she asked if he had removed the body, at which point Christ said “Mary!” and she finally recognised him. At that moment, she reaches out to touch or embrace her Lord, but is rebuffed with the words “*Noli me Tangere*” (“do not touch me”), to which he then adds by way of an explanation, “for I have not yet ascended to my father”.

Titian captures the moment of

transformation perfectly. Christ holds a scythe in one hand, as if he is the gardener, but is also dressed in his burial shroud, emphasising the dual nature of his appearance. Mary reaches out, hand quivering, as if not quite believing, but Jesus is withdrawing from her with his right hand while opening himself up to her with his left. Seeing is believing seems to be the message.

Behind, the trees echo the scene: one low with leaves seeming to shake in the breeze; the other soaring upwards and reminding us where Christ will go shortly. The background is beautifully rendered and signals the increasing importance of landscape in European painting. The flock of sheep has both a symbolic and naturalistic role, and the image of a Christian miracle also has the resonance of a painted pastoral poem.











### 36 | Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Supper at Emmaus*, 1601

National Gallery, London

According to St Luke's Gospel, later in the same day after his appearance to Mary Magdalene, Christ encountered two of his disciples – Cleopas and an unnamed one – on the road to Emmaus, a village about seven miles outside Jerusalem. They were arguing about what had happened in the tomb, with neither believing what Mary had claimed to have seen. Jesus, unrecognised, talks with them, gives them a lesson in the scriptures – "Was the Messiah not bound to suffer thus before entering upon his glory?" – and then joins them for dinner. "And when he had sat down with them at table, he took bread and said the blessing; he broke the bread and offered it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognised him; and he vanished from their sight."

Caravaggio depicts the moment of revelation and realisation after a long day of despair for the disciples. The picture is explosive, with Cleopas grabbing his chair as if to spring up and the other disciple flinging his arm out towards the viewer, seemingly puncturing the picture plane itself. Christ makes a gesture of blessing, once again evoking the Eucharist and echoing the Last Supper. Indeed, it's

as if Caravaggio has taken the format of Leonardo's image and zoomed in, taking the viewer right into the scene.

The painting is full of subtle contrast, not just light and dark, but the calm purity of Jesus and the energised earthy humanity of the disciples with their heavy fishermen's hands and ripped working dress. The detailing is immense and so deftly painted. The still life on the table is a subject in itself and the shadow cast by the fruit bowl in the foreground is that of a fish, an early symbol of Christ as well as evoking the occupation of many of his followers. This almost miraculously painted illusion of reality enhances the idea of a miracle taking place in the picture, but with a nice twist. The inn keeper who cowers subtly but discernibly before the revealed Christ appears to cast a dark halo around Jesus as his shadow hits the wall. But in reality the shadow should also partly obscure Christ, who seems tangibly real to his disciples but also of another world.

### 37 | Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Doubting Thomas*, 1602-1603

| Sanssouci Bildergalerie, Potsdam

As both a continuation of the post-Resurrection narrative and a reaffirmation of the physical presence of the risen Christ, Caravaggio also painted this powerful image of *Doubting Thomas* a year after *The Supper at Emmaus* for a wealthy cardinal and private patron – Benedetto Guistiniani – in Rome.

This time, the account comes from the Gospel of St John, who describes how Jesus had appeared to the disciples in Jerusalem late on Easter Sunday, "behind locked doors for fear of the Jews". One of them, Thomas, was missing and subsequently proclaimed that "unless I see the mark of nails on his hands, unless I put my finger into the place the nails were, and my hand into his side, I will not believe it". A week later, Jesus returned and Caravaggio depicts when he says to Thomas: "Reach your finger here; see my hands. Reach your hand here and put it into my side. Be unbelieving no longer."

The painting cuts out all extraneous detail with Jesus, Thomas and two other disciples gathering round to create a diamond shape of four heads at the centre. The view is close up, so much so that one feels

pulled up into the picture as if forced to scrutinise the flesh of Christ with something of the intensity of Thomas. His brow is wrinkled in concentration and apprehension, the light catching him and his hand as it penetrates the wound with guidance from Jesus. It is not an image for the faint hearted, a graphic depiction of violated flesh brought back to life. It stresses the humanity of Christ and his followers – weary, ageing men who are shrouded in darkness, but who see the light.

The scene wrestles with the idea of seeing and believing, something Caravaggio could solicit from his viewers, who almost believed they were there, but who, when they thought about Christ's subsequent words to Thomas in St John's Gospel, probably felt blessed simply to have seen the painting: "Because you have seen me you have found faith. Happy are those who never saw me and yet have found faith."

"Reach your finger here; see my hands. Reach your hand here and put it into my side. Be unbelieving no longer, but believe."

JOHN 20: 27







38

### 38 Anish Kapoor, *The Healing of St Thomas*, 1989

*San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla*

The close up and focus on the wound seen in Caravaggio's painting is taken to a logical, simple and subtle conclusion in this work by the contemporary British artist Anish Kapoor (b.1954). It was made initially for the Venice Biennale in 1990, a simple gash in the wall filled with red pigment. It is both a literal wound in the fabric of the building and an abstract depiction of the wound of Christ. It is also a modern reworking of a medieval tradition where the five wounds of Jesus were often shown on both shields borne by angels as part of an heraldic along with the Instruments of the Passion (crown of thorns, nails, lance, cross, column of flagellation), collectively known as the *Arma Christi* or arms/weapons of Christ through which death was defeated.

The wounds were symbols of triumph and a focus for devotion and prayer. For Kapoor, the idea of belief and scepticism, physical interaction and contemplation is important in a work which also explores the nature of space and the distinction between painting, sculpture and installation. *The Healing of St Thomas* encourages the viewer to find out by looking and then by placing a finger into the cavity to see if it is real or illusory, just as Thomas did. "The metaphorical language is that he reaches out to touch what is apparently an illusion, only to find reality," Kapoor stated when discussing this work in 1993. "The eye and the hand need each other. Once he has touched the wound, a kind of healing takes place. He is healed of his doubt."

Kapoor's art stems from a rich cultural background. He was born in Bombay, but has lived in Britain for the past three decades. His father was Hindu, his mother Jewish, and he often alludes to different religious beliefs and

rituals in his work. He believes in the transformative force of art and the creation of what he describes as "a shrine for one person" through the power of contemplation. Interviewed in 1990 in Venice after *The Healing of St Thomas* was created, Kapoor remarked: "Perhaps the contemplative object is also a panacea. In the end, art does not provide any answers. It is no substitute for religious experience. Perhaps it can put forward some interesting questions, if it is any good."





39

## THE ASCENSION

Christ's last appearance on earth and his departure to Heaven is the culmination of the entire Gospel story, an event known as the Ascension. John, however, makes no mention of it; Matthew ends with Jesus on a mountain in Galilee assuring his disciples that "I am with you always, to the end of time"; and Mark suggests that after he talked to the disciples at the table in Jerusalem, "the Lord Jesus was taken up into Heaven, and took his seat at the right hand of God". Luke gives a more visual description with Christ leading the disciples to Bethany, a few miles south-east of Jerusalem, where "he blessed them with uplifted hands; and in the act of blessing them he parted from them". It is, however, as the author of the Acts of the Apostles that Luke produces the most dramatic description of the Ascension and the one that has most inspired artists.

### 39 | Giotto di Bondone, *The Ascension*, c.1303-1306

*Arena Chapel, Padua*

The Ascension was slow to appear in Western art and remains a less frequently painted subject than the Resurrection. In the fifth century it is shown in mosaic form and on the doors of the church of St Sabina in Rome. By the twelfth century it was established enough to provide the sole subject for a fresco (now damaged) in the church of San Pietro in Tuscania, near the city of Viterbo. But the most striking version first appears in Padua in the Arena Chapel. Here, Giotto takes the account from the Acts of the Apostles, locating the scene at the top of a hill – "called Olivet, which is no more than a Sabbath day's journey" from Jerusalem, according to Luke – and showing Christ rising Heavenwards on a cloud. "As they watched he was lifted up, and a cloud removed him from their sight. As he

was going, and as they were gazing intently into the sky, all at once there stood beside them two men in white who said, 'Men of Galilee, why stand there looking up into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken away from you up to Heaven, will come in the same way as you have seen him go.'

Giotto shows the two "men in white", or angels, floating against a blue void beneath the ascending figure of Christ, with the eleven disciples and the Virgin Mary rooted firmly to the ground, kneeling in awe. Flanking Jesus are the heavenly hosts, choirs of angels and saints completing a cruciform with obvious symbolism. Jesus looks away from the viewer and from his followers as if to emphasise that his sights are now on another realm. His hands reach up and out of the picture frame as if pulling himself Heavenwards. He is framed by a mandorla, a golden oval reserved for souls in glory, a device that Giotto uses in glorious technicolour in his final image in the Chapel – the Last Judgement.



40 Albrecht Dürer, *The Ascension of Christ* from the *Small Passion* woodcut series, 1509-1511

British Museum, London

This image of the Ascension is a curious and faintly comic one with only Christ's feet visible. It is first seen in an illustrated book in the eleventh century associated with Winchester School of Illumination, but was most widely disseminated by the German artist Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528).

It is cropped and close up partly to stress the miraculous nature of what is happening and partly to involve the viewer, who is led into the scene by the two disciples in the foreground. Dürer was the greatest artist of the Northern Renaissance, the painter who introduced the techniques and styles of Italian art to Germany. But he was also the first internationally recognised master of etching, engraving and woodcutting. Through these various processes, images were then printed using the recently developed moveable metal presses that revolutionised the spread of ideas throughout Europe. The impact of this was comparable with that of the mass media in the twentieth century, and among a largely illiterate European population, Dürer's widely circulated picture stories had a graphic clarity and immediacy that made them almost universally understood. In this way, these printed images aided the ongoing programme of the Christian mission proclaimed by Christ to his disciples just before the Ascension when, according to St Matthew, he told them to "go forth and make all nations my disciples".



... as they watched, he was lifted up, and a cloud removed him from their sight.

ACTS 1:9

41 Jacopo Tintoretto, *The Ascension*, c.1578-1581

Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice

Rather than being framed in a mandorla, Christ's body assumes its shape as he cuts through a swathe of cloudy vapour, his halo slicing through the top of the picture frame. Tintoretto renders one of the more dramatic images of the Ascension with a contrast of light and darkness and between the clearly defined terrestrial and celestial realms.

The angels swirl joyfully around Jesus, their wings seeming to flutter with excitement, pointing upwards and creating a sense of dynamic force throughout the upper section of the painting. Below, the disciples seem less than awestruck by the triumphant vision which unfolds in the sky. Some historians have argued that the eleven figures include the Old Testament prophets Elijah and Moses, who were

themselves elevated to Heaven, depicted in pink and gold in the centre of the landscape and lending scriptural authority to Christ's proclamation that his Ascension was ordained by the prophets. More emphatic, however, is the apostle in the foreground who reads his Bible and "sees" Jesus's last appearance on earth through the scriptures and in his mind's eye. Likewise, with one or two exceptions, the disciples gathered at a table on the right seem wrapped in inner contemplation in a painting whose message suggests that seeing is not necessarily believing.

Finally, the way in which Tintoretto paints the scene suggests another powerful idea. The figures and landscape are depicted in a sketchy, almost ethereal manner, while, paradoxically, the celestial vision above is handled with bravura and confidence. This visual inversion makes clear that the earthly world is no more than a pale reflection of the spiritual one.



## FURTHER READING

### Biblical studies

*The Bible*. Biblical quotations used in this book are taken from the New English Bible, published by the Bible Society in association with Oxford and Cambridge University Press. Many still prefer the archaic but elegant language of the Authorised, or King James, version of the Bible, available in two volumes: *The Old Testament*, with an introduction by George Steiner (1996); *The New Testament* with an introduction by John Drury (1998)

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*Easter in Art* is a three-part television series by Seventh Art Productions for Five Television, first screened on 18 and 20 April 2003. It was written and presented by Tim Marlow and directed by Andrew Hutton. The executive producer was Phil Grabsky, camera and photography by Hugh Hood, sound by Chris Wright, editing by Phil Reynolds, research by Ben Harding. The production team was Jennifer Goodsell, Angela Vermond, Julia Wilkie, Jack White and Rachel Wexler and the head of production was Amanda Wilkie

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Published in 2003 by Five Television in association with Cultureshock Media to accompany the series *Easter in Art*

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All text © Tim Marlow  
Designed by Stephen Coates  
Sub editor: Ian Massey  
Picture researcher: Juliet Duff  
Production manager: Nicola Vanstone  
Publisher: Phil Allison

Printed by Friary Press  
Repro by DawkinsColour  
Distribution by BSS

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ISBN number 0-9544208-1-0



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KP-743-368